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# **Educating for Professional Judgement**

**How social work students develop  
skills in practice**

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**Doctorate in Social Work**

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I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:.....

# Acknowledgments

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# Abstract

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This thesis presents a hermeneutic phenomenological study into how social work students develop the skills required for professional judgement. Professional judgement is an important and complex facet of social work. A review of the literature indicates that there has been a recent increase in empirical research into the sense-making and reasoning of social workers' decision making and professional judgement, yet little research exists into the development of this expertise. One of the Standards of Proficiency of the Health and Care Professionals Council is that a registered social worker in England should "Be able to practise as an autonomous professional exercising their own professional judgement" (HCPC 2017 p6). It is therefore incumbent upon social work education to enable students to develop this expertise and research is needed in order to understand how this can best be achieved. The intention of the research was to seek answers to the following questions

- How do social work students develop skills for professional judgement?
- What enables, facilitates and enhances this development?

The research was framed within a constructionist epistemological paradigm and conceptually influenced by a combination of Authentic Professional Learning, Appreciative Inquiry and Practice-based Research. The methodology was hermeneutic phenomenology and the method was semi-structured interviews constructed around critical incidents of learning on placement. The participants were 14 MSc Social Work students from a university in England who were at the point of graduation. Nvivo10 was used to code the data and the data were analysed thematically. The findings indicate that the phenomenological essence of the development of skills for social work professional judgement lies in the presence and interrelation of three domains. These are professional responsibility, facilitation of the professional voice and learner agency. Philosophical and psychological concepts of autonomy are discussed and presented as a means to understand what is taking place for social work students. I suggest that a re-appraisal of autonomy as relational and a consideration of the value of autonomy-supportive learning and teaching could prove instructive to understanding both the development of skills for professional judgement for social work students and the way in which this can be enabled.

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# Abbreviations

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AI – Appreciative inquiry

APL – Authentic professional learning

BME – Black and minority ethnic

CIS – Critical Interpretive Synthesis

CIT – Critical Incident Technique

HCPC – Health and Care Professionals Council

PBR – Practice-Based Research

PE – Practice Educator

RBP – Research-Based Practice

REC – Research Ethics Committee

# 1 Introduction

The principle considerations for this thesis are professional judgement, professional learning and social work students. Winch (2014 p 58) states “one of the most important matters that the curriculum for professional education should be concerned with is the development of the ability to reason, judge and act in complex and unpredictable work situations”. A review of the literature for this thesis indicates a recent increase in research into how social workers do reason, act and judge but research into the development of their ability to do so has largely been neglected. My intention with this thesis is to begin to address this gap. The two research questions guiding this thesis are:

- How do social work students develop skills for professional judgement?
- What enables, facilitates and enhances this development?

## 1.1 Context

Social workers in England are required to be registered by the Health and Care Professionals Council (HCPC). One of the Standards of Proficiency (SoP) of the HCPC is that in order to be registered, a social worker must “Be able to practise as an autonomous professional exercising their own professional judgement” (HCPC 2017 p6). This means that from the point of qualification social workers need be able to use professional judgement. It cannot be assumed that this is a facet of expertise to be developed over time, post-qualification. Therefore social work pre-qualifying education should have a role to play in equipping students for this. A gap in research in this area

means however that there is limited evidence from which to construct a pedagogical approach to educating social work students for professional judgement.

Formulating, exercising and communicating one's judgement is at the core of what it is to be a professional (Rutter & Brown 2012). Social workers are involved in "numerous micro-decision" (Munro 2002 p110) as well as major life and death decisions throughout the course of their careers. Within the context of tragic and highly publicised deaths of children and vulnerable adults over the decades, social work professional judgement in the UK is often perceived as inadequate and requiring scrutiny. This has fostered a lack of trust in the expertise of social workers (Kirkpatrick et al., 2005; Smith, 2001). Kirkpatrick et al. (2005) have argued that the inherent mistrust of public services by successive governments has led to the preoccupation with controlling front line staff thus perpetuating a move from autonomy to accountability which manifests in, and is maintained by, the culture of performance management. Ferguson (2008) sees this as having resulted in social workers' "identification with the organisation rather than a specific profession" (p47).

Taylor and White (2005 p938) argue that from the 1970s "a range of opinions and positions can be found in reports, which retrospectively scrutinize social work actions", as to whether the perceived problem lies in an inability to decisively reach a conclusion and therefore "carve sufficient certainty from uncertainty" (Taylor & White 2005 p938) or, with reference to Laming (2003), a lack of 'respectful uncertainty' means carving "too much certainty from ambiguous and contradictory information" (Taylor & White 2005 p939). This indicates both the complexity of professional judgement and the importance of understanding what is needed to enable social workers to navigate this complexity. Taylor and White's (2005) view is that the uncertainties of practice mean we should be educating for uncertainty and that the pursuance of a technical-rational approach has been an inhibitor to this. Munro (2010) argues that the increase in

prescriptive procedures, which have been the response to what have been considered to be 'errors' in child protection (Munro 2010 p1140), has meant that professional judgement has been diminished and curtailed. This, she suggests, has created further errors. Her recommendation therefore was for a reduction in bureaucracy and a greater emphasis on professional judgement (Munro 2011). This further emphasises the need for students to begin to develop skills in professional judgement prior to entering qualified practice.

## **1.2 My interest**

I am a social work educator based at a UK university and previously I have been a social worker and social work manager as well as a practice teacher and a co-ordinator for students on practice placements. It is a combination of these roles that led to my interest in the learning of social work students and professional judgement. I was a social worker during the implementation of the NHS and Community Care Act 1990. This saw the rise of 'care management' and the embedding of a managerial procedural culture. This culture gave social workers reason to believe that they were no longer able to exercise their own professional judgement, yet I was aware that they were doing so frequently, even though they were not identifying it as such. I have also experienced this from social work students, practitioners we work with and practice educators. The concern I have is that if social workers do not recognise their capacity for professional judgement and their ability to use "good authority" (Ferguson 2011 p7) then service users miss out. My argument is that in a procedurally driven managerialist social work environment, skills in professional judgement become more not less important. To find out how to develop and enhance these skills for social workers entering the profession should be a priority for social work education.

### **1.3 Previous Doctoral work**

I have undertaken two previous assignments during my Professional Doctorate that have been relevant to the work of this thesis and I will be referring to their findings throughout. I undertook an exploratory study in 2012. This was a smaller scale study similar to the research for thesis. I set out to find how social work students, on the point of graduation, interpret the concept of professional judgement and how they developed the skills of professional judgement. I used a critical incident technique (CIT) in semi-structured interviews. This study was the basis for an article that I will refer to in the thesis (Rawles 2016).

The other relevant piece of work was a Critical Analytical Study (CAS) undertaken in 2013. This formed a literature review on how social work students develop skills of professional judgement. I reviewed empirical research studies on professional judgement (25 studies). 8 of the studies had social work students as participants and 16 had social workers as participants. None of these studies had the stated aim of finding out how students learn and develop in relation to professional judgement. The following main themes emerged from a combination of both sets of studies:

- Confidence appeared to be a significant factor in influencing professional judgement in practice.
- Social work students found it difficult to challenge service users, other professionals and their own organization. The fear of the consequences of such challenge appears to impede professional judgement. This is linked to issues of confidence.
- There is some indication that systematized processes and frameworks designed to aid assessment and decision making may hinder the development of expertise in professional judgement

- Some social workers appear to develop narratives of service user lives and circumstance in order to assist them to arrive at their professional judgement.

I will make reference to the CAS throughout the thesis.

## **1.4 Social work professional judgement**

This thesis is concerned with how social work students learn the skills required for professional judgement. It is not about the mechanisms of decision making or an appraisal of decision making processes. I developed the following definition of professional judgement to use for the research:

To draw a conclusion, make a decision, offer an opinion  
or recommend a course of action within a professional  
context as a social work student

I developed this definition from a combination of

- A review of the relevant research and literature
- Findings from the my exploratory study
- Experience of professional judgement in use as a social worker and social work manager

The intention was for this definition to be broad enough to encompass the use of professional judgement in all areas of social work practice and provide sufficient scope so that the participants need not spend time labouring over whether a particular example fits a narrow definition.

There is no consensus about definitions of ‘decision making’ and ‘professional judgement’ in social work and some use the terms interchangeably (e.g. O’Sullivan 2006). Taylor (2010) is one of the few writing in the field of social work who provides a

definition. With reference to Dowie (1993 p8) Taylor distinguishes between “judgement” as meaning “assessing between alternatives” and decision making “choosing between alternatives”. Taylor (2010 p10) defines professional judgement to be:-

“When a professional considers the evidence about a client or family situation in the light of professional knowledge to reach a conclusion or recommendation”

Whilst this encompasses some of elements of my definition of professional judgement it differs in that I include decision making within the remit of professional judgement. This is partly because linguistically the two are often used interchangeably and my definition exists primarily to facilitate effective research with students. I did not want to limit this. Secondly whilst undertaking the exploratory study it was evident that the boundary between what might, in Taylor’s definition, be classed as professional judgement and what might be decision making was blurred as this seemed an iterative process.

Rutter & Brown (2012) do not define social work professional judgement in their book on the subject but discuss what it is associated with. They argue that it has “practical reasoning” (p16) at its core. This, they say involves a “deliberation” in which a mix of knowledge, skill, attribute and value are used to arrive at a conclusion (p17). Others have distinguished between the differences in the type of professional judgement used. Writing in the field of education, Tripp (2002 p114) presents four types of judgement “practical”, “reflective”, “socially critical” and “diagnostic”. Coles (2002 p6) drawing on Tripp’s work as well as that of Grundy (1987) and Fish & Coles (1998) also presents four types of judgement with corresponding indicative questions:

- Intuitive – what do I do now?
- Strategic – what might I do now?



- Reflective – what could I do now?
- Deliberative – what ought I to do now?

It is the deliberative on which Coles (2002) focuses and he defines this as moving beyond the merely reflective as defined by Tripp (2002). He sees the deliberative as being where “the professional sees practice as involving competing moral ideals, moral conflicts and unresolvable dilemmas” (Fish & Coles 1998 p248 cited in Coles 2002 p6).

In a review of literature on decision making, Taylor (2006 p1190) states that studies can be conceptualised into three categories.

1. **‘normative studies’** that look at how decisions ‘should’ be made if the decision makers were rational, i.e. if they were using some consistent and unbiased method of weighing the value of options and appraising the probability of events;
2. **‘descriptive studies’** that look at how professionals make decisions in the real world of practice; and
3. **‘prescriptive studies’** that explore ways in which professionals might be assisted to make ‘better’ decisions, albeit without assuming rational decision making using known ‘rules’ (Borcherding et al.1990).

There are discrepancies in views in terms of how decisions ‘should’ be made and how professionals can be ‘assisted’ to make them. This divide is embedded in differing perceptions on the nature of decision making itself. This is commonly divided between the concept of actuarial decision making, a consideration of probabilities and clinical decision making, an assessment based on the expertise of the decision maker (Taylor 2010). There are those that argue frameworks based on an actuarial approach would help to standardise and rationalise the decision making process in social work and thus avoid decision traps (e.g. O’Sullivan 2008). Conversely there are those who believe that the complexities and uncertainties in social work could not be accommodated within this approach (e.g. van de Luitgaarden 2009; Polkinghorne 2004).

Klein (1999 p33), based on his research with firefighters, argues for what he calls a Recognition-Primed Decision Model. He suggests that we use a system that “recognizing things without knowing how we do the recognizing”. He contends that what we perceive to be intuition is actually us using our experience to “recognize key patterns that indicate the dynamic of the situation” (1999 p31).

Developments in neuroscience have provided an additional dimension to the debate by confirming the neurological link between decision making and emotions (Damasio 1994), a finding which has been drawn upon by social work academics discussing emotional intelligence such as Morrison (2006), Howe (2008) and Munro (2011).

Debates about decision making or professional judgement also centre on the concept of heuristics. These are cognitive short-cuts or ‘rules of thumb’ (Taylor 2016). The concern is that decision making is impacted by these heuristics which may result in a biased approach and liable to judgement errors.

## **1.5 The concept of ‘skills’**

In the research questions and throughout this thesis I have chosen to use the term ‘skills’ in relation to social worker professional judgement. The term ‘skill’ is frequently used in discussions of professional development and social worker expertise yet rarely defined. It can seem inadequate for expressing the myriad complexities that are involved in professional practice as it has technicist overtones that jar with the intricacies of human interaction and professional understanding. My argument is both to accept that use of any one such term has limitations but also to re-appraise ‘skill’ as a concept distinct from ‘technique’. This re-appraisal positions the concept of ‘skill’ as

having greater depth of meaning in relation to professional development and professional judgement than the reductive way in which it is sometimes used.

My use of the word 'skill' is embedded in the idea of 'knowing how' conceptualised by Ryle (1949/2009). He equates this with "the exercise of intelligence in practice" (Ryle 1949/2009 p28). His reason for introducing the concept of 'knowing how' was to distinguish it from a focus merely on 'knowing that' which he critiqued as a feature of what he called the "intellectualist legend". Ryle (1949/2009 p17) states:

Theorists have been so preoccupied with the task of investigating the nature, the source and the credentials of the theories that we adopt that they have for the most part ignored the question what it is for someone to know how to perform tasks

The reason he gives for this "intellectualist legend" is that "doing" is considered a "muscular affair" so it is therefore not equated with cognitive processes and "written off as a merely physical process" (Ryle 1949/2009 p21). He contends that 'knowing how' is not merely the ability to perform tasks but to do so in a knowing way, using knowledge and understanding.

Ryle's concepts of 'knowing how' and 'knowing that' have been critiqued in several ways. Construction of his philosophical arguments has been questioned (e.g. Stanley & Williamson 2001) as has his approach to the concept of knowledge itself (Luntley 2011). Luntley (2011 p28) argues that a proliferation of types of knowledge is not required because propositional knowledge will suffice were we to have a less "impoverished" notion of propositional. My intention here is not to rehearse all the arguments for and against Ryle's original ideas but to highlight that the 'doing' of practice incorporates the use of knowledge that informs that 'doing'. This will be developed further in Chapter 2 when discussing Eraut's (1994) concept of knowledge in use.

This division between ‘knowing that’ and ‘knowing how’ is at the heart of debates about the division between theory or academy and practice in social work. Conceptualising them as separate entities runs the risk of cementing that division rather than understanding knowing and doing as an integrated whole. In reality, in social work education in England, theory learning also happens in practice settings and skills development also happens in the academy and the learning from one setting is built upon and consolidated in the other.

Winch (2010;2014), in his discussion on professional expertise, presents five “nested” forms (2014 p52) that comprise ‘knowing how’. These are ‘technique’, ‘skill’, ‘transversal abilities’, ‘project management’ and ‘occupational capacity’. My use of the term ‘skills’ for this thesis is best defined by a combination of the categories of ‘skill’ and transversal abilities proposed by Winch. To acquire a skill, according to Winch (2014 p52), is to “have acquired the ability to carry it out in *contextually relevant conditions*”. This is in contrast to ‘technique’ which describes the way “one performs a task or carries out a procedure” (Winch 2014 p52). Thus techniques are associated with the way things are done whereas ‘skills’ are “what individuals acquire, possess, exercise, lose and so on” (Winch 2010 p42). To use an example relevant to social work, there are techniques involved in undertaking a social work assessment. These could include asking a series of questions, using a diagrammatical framework, researching information from third party sources or a combination of these and others. However, the skill of assessing the needs of an individual requires more than the mastery of each of these individual techniques. It requires an understanding of what one is attempting to do and of how such techniques can combine to fulfil this objective in a given situation. For this skill to be carried out well it also needs social workers to appreciate the implications of a wider set of understandings and knowledge to do with human relations, issues of power, cultural context, emotion and authority to name but a

few. Winch (2014 p56) emphasises that nothing about the exercise of skill “excludes the application of knowledge..to practice”. Whether it is termed ‘knowing how’ or, as Luntley (2011) would have it, ‘propositional knowledge’, skill incorporates the use of knowledge. My conceptualisation of skill for this thesis therefore, incorporates everything that is required for the effective exercise of practice in relation to professional judgement.

Winch (2010; 2014) introduces the phrase ‘transversal ability’ as a translation from the German ‘fahigkeiten’ to encompass the functions required for skilful practice in a professional context. This includes the ability to “plan, co-ordinate, control, communicate and evaluate” whilst paying attention to the outcome (Winch 2014 p54). He introduces this term because he states that, unlike the English language, German provides a useful distinction between skills (fertigkeiten) and transversal abilities (fahigkeiten). In social work education we talk of the value of transferable skills. My interpretation of Winch is that transversal abilities are those higher level professional skills that are involved in this transfer. Whilst accepting the limitations of the English word ‘skill’ in this respect, I chose not to complicate the discussion by the inclusion of the unfamiliar phrase ‘transversal abilities’. I seek rather to make explicit these transversal abilities as a facet of the concept of professional skill which is often overlooked.

‘Skills’ conceptualised in this way encompasses a breadth and depth sufficient to encapsulate what is required for professional judgement. It also suggests a property of the individual that can change and develop. An alternative would have been to use the term ‘capability’. This would have aligned with current terminology in social work education in England such as the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) which The British Association of Social Workers defines as a professional standards framework (BASW 2017). Perceived in this way a capability is a standard which one

needs to reach. The ability to effect professional judgement may be an important capability that a social worker should possess but I would argue that it is the development and enactment of skills which enable them to reach that capability. It is the inference of something which is of the individual and active rather than passive that drew me to the use of the term 'skills' for this thesis.

I will go on to discuss, in the literature review (Chapter 2) and the findings (Chapter 4) that social work professional judgement requires more than the availability of evidence and the technique of decision making processes. It has a complexity that requires the skill of the social worker, a skill that can and needs to develop. This will form a fundamental argument of my thesis.

## **1.6 The structure of the thesis**

- **Chapter 2** - provides a review of the literature. An updated literature search for this thesis revealed that empirical research on the development of social work students' professional judgement skills remain very limited. The chapter first reviews research on social workers and professional judgement followed by a discussion of the literature on professional learning.
- **Chapter 3** – provides presentation and discussion on the methodology and methods and data analysis.
- **Chapter 4** – will comprise of both a presentation and a discussion of the findings in the context of the literature identified in Chapter 2.
- **Chapter 5** – I will present the relevance of autonomy to the findings of this thesis. I will then explore theories of autonomy and argue that a re-appraisal of the conceptualisation of autonomy can help to understand how students develop skills for professional judgement and how we enable them to do so

- **Chapter 6** – I will conclude the thesis by summarising the key messages from the research, discussing implications for practice and research as well as discuss the limitations of the study and my own learning journey.

Throughout this thesis, when content has previously been discussed, I will make reference in brackets to the section location where it can be found.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 1 (1:3) for phase 1 of my professional doctorate in 2012 I undertook an exploratory study into how social work students develop skills of professional judgement. In phase 2 of the doctorate, in 2013, I conducted a Critical Analytical Study (CAS) that sought to explore research relevant to the same topic. In both studies I did not locate any published research that had the specific aim of understanding how social work students develop skills for professional judgement. The few studies that did link learning with social work decision making or professional judgement were focused either on the teaching of specific decision making approaches or on evaluation of specific, discrete, pedagogical inputs. At that time I found there to be limited empirical research more generally into social work professional judgement or decision-making and only 8 studies which included social work students as participants. I had used inclusion criteria with an unspecified start date so the search covered several decades of potential research.

An updated literature search for this thesis from September 2013 to 2017 identified an increase in empirical research on social work professional judgement but only 4 included social work students and none had the stated aim of finding out how students, or indeed social workers learn or develop these skills. The gap identified in the literature is something that I wish to begin to address with the research for this thesis.



Despite the absence of research about how students develop skills for professional judgement, the literature search for this thesis revealed that there has been a growing recent body of research that aims to find out how social workers form their professional judgement or make decisions in practice situations. This research often takes the form of considering the 'sense-making' or reasoning processes involved for the social worker plus some research on the use of tools and frameworks or discretion in social work decision making. Whilst none of this research has the specific aim of exploring the learning or development of professional judgement skills, this body of knowledge can usefully inform an exploration of the learning and development required. It can do so by providing insight into the processes that social workers take in relation to professional judgement in practice and what supports or challenges this. Scrutinising what the evidence tells us about this sense-making process could help to inform the question of what students will need to be able to do in relation to professional judgement once they enter the workplace and thus could inform the development of such skills. In order to explore this I have reviewed empirical research into how social workers enact professional judgement in practice **(2.3)**. I have also reviewed empirical research into social workers' use of decision-making tools, frameworks and their use of discretion **(2.4)** as well as the very few studies where students are participants of research on decision making or professional judgement **(2.5)**. Before presenting these reviews I will outline the methodology and search strategy used **(2.2)**.

I chose to keep the focus of the review as social work discipline-specific. There are other bodies of literature into decision making and professional judgement to which I could have turned, including within the medical, educational and legal fields. Firstly, such an expansive literature review that could do justice to both depth and breadth of the field is not possible given the scope of the professional doctorate. Secondly, there is a growing evidence base from within social work itself and this thesis provided an opportunity to learn from this recent body of work. Thirdly whilst professional judgement

in social work has parallels with other professions it also often has differences in terms of its purpose, complicating factors and legal and policy framework. It is certainly the case that social work could learn from other professions in this area and this could provide fruitful further investigation at a later date.

Having reviewed empirical research into social work professional judgement it was necessary to consider what factors might impact the learning of this for social work students. In order to do this I will discuss key research and conceptualisations of professional expertise development and professional learning in practice (2.7). I have moved beyond social work for this aspect of the review with the intention of highlighting the findings of key exponents in the field of professional learning that provide some insight into how social work students might learn in practice and what enables this learning to take place.

## **2.2 Literature review methodology and search strategy**

For my CAS I used Critical Interpretive Synthesis (CIS) (Dixon-Wood et al. 2006) to review the literature and did so again for this thesis. Dixon-Wood et al. (2006) argue that whilst a systematic review is useful where there are clearly defined concepts at the outset, and a need for aggregation of evidence to test hypothesis and theories, it has limitations when the need is for interpreting findings and for “questioning the way the literature constructs its problematics” (Dixon-Wood et al. 2006 p2). A CIS gives emphasis to critically considering and problematizing concepts within research. This is particularly important where there is limited research within a field and, I would suggest, where the field is complicated by the need to interpret research findings in the context of their implications for a practice environment.

The primary focus of a CIS is to locate and interpret evidence that can inform the objective of the research, so, unlike a systematic review, it means that a search strategy can be broad and flexible in order to identify any studies that might have relevance to the research. This is important for a subject such as the development of skills for social work professional judgement where there is limited research and where evidence may appear tangential but may still have something important to contribute towards understanding the subject.

My search of the literature was guided by Dixon-Wood et al.'s (2006 p4) premise to "prioritise papers that appeared to be relevant, rather than particular study types or papers that met particular methodological standards". They suggest that rigour in a CIS is maintained by the interpretation and critique of studies once included. Dixon-Wood et al. (2006) do not elaborate on a mechanism to ensure this research rigour once studies have been included. Sharland & Taylor (2006 p505) comment that literature review methodologies such as that proposed by Dixon-Wood et al. (2006) move away from the "positivist.. aggregative assumptions about knowledge accumulation" that characterise some systematic reviews. However, they make the point that it then becomes hard to strike the balance between "the priorities of discovery and reflection on the one hand, and time, cost and rigour on the other" (Sharland & Taylor 2006 p510). In order to bolster the rigour of the CIS I used the principles of Pawson et al.'s (2003) TAPUPAS standards for knowledge review as a guide when reviewing the research. These are:

- Transparency
- Accuracy
- Purposivity
- Utility
- Propriety
- Accessibility
- Specificity

As this literature review is only one component of the professional doctorate thesis there is not the scope to detail the extent to which each study met these standards. However, two of the standards are worthy of note in relation to my review of the literature. I questioned the purposivity of comparative studies where the participant numbers were too low to draw meaningful comparisons and where there were discrepancies in the groups to be compared. This was the case with Hyun & Adams (2016) whose participants were 15 social workers from South Korea and 13 military social workers from the USA. Another such study was O'Hare et al (2013) who compared mental health compulsory intervention decision-making across the jurisdictions of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Their overall number of participants was 28. This was further subdivided between three groups of 13 experienced mental health social workers, 7 social workers undertaking training for mental health practice and 8 social work students. This sub-division meant that some combined categories of participant type and jurisdiction only had one participant. The study may also be impacted by the discrepancy in the level of experience of compulsory intervention in the different groups, given this role requires practitioners to have a further qualification. Despite their methodological limitations I decided to keep both these studies in the review as my research questions are not dependant on knowing the comparative outcomes of such studies but the extent to which such research can inform me about social workers' experience of professional judgement. In addition O'Hare et al.'s (2013) research is one of the few that includes social work students. This demonstrates the ethos of CIS as within a systematic review it is likely that both studies would have been excluded.

Utility as a standard in relation to my review could refer to the usefulness of the research to my own research questions as well as its usefulness to the practice of social work professional judgement. As Sharland & Taylor (2006 p512) state the TAPUPAS standard of utility "may lie in its potential not just to tell us what works but to

shed light on how, why and in what contexts it works". This latter point is one to which I shall return in the review. This is in relation to the extent to which research methodologies that are not based on the real-world practice of professional judgement can sufficiently replicate the complexity of practice so that they have utility to fully answer the questions arising from practice.

### **2.2.1 Search strategy**

I used three databases, Scopus, ASSIA and Web of Science as they are known to comprehensively cover fields of literature relevant to my research. As advocated by Dixon-Wood et al. (2006) in order to ensure nothing was missed I also used reference-chaining, web-searches and followed up work from academics I knew to be researching the field. Given the lack of research about the learning of professional judgement skills, I also carried out scoping searches of the content lists of social work education journals in case there was relevant research that used different terminology than I had accounted for. The journals included were Social Work Education; Journal of Social Work Education; Journal of Teaching in Social Work; Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning and The Field Educator. No additional relevant studies were found from reference-chaining or scoping of journals.

The optimal focal point of my literature was research into how social work students learn or develop professional judgement or decision making skills or expertise. I initially constructed an inclusion and exclusion criteria in line with this (**table 2:1**). As I will discuss I changed the criteria following initial searches and both sets of criteria appear on the table.

**Table 2:1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria. (Discarded original criteria italicised and in brackets)**

Inclusion	Exclusion
Professional judgement or decision making where the focus is on the social worker enacting this  <i>(The learning or development of skills or expertise in professional judgement or decision making in social work)</i>	Decision making where the focus is not on the decision maker but on the decisions made; the outcome or consequence of decisions; exclusively medical decision or service user involvement in decisions  <i>(Professional judgement or decision making that has no learning or expertise development dimension)</i>
Social Work Students or Social Workers either as research participants or as the focus of the study	Studies that do not focus on the experience of social workers or social work students  Studies that exclusively evaluate modules or teaching input where there is no practice or simulated practice component
September 2013 – present	Before September 2013 - as this was covered in the CAS
Empirical research that has been peer-reviewed	Theoretical, conceptual or opinion pieces; articles discussing pedagogical approaches that have no empirical research component; Grey literature

I used the broad search terms of ‘professional judgement/judgment’ **or** ‘decision making’ **and** ‘social work students’ **or** ‘social work education’. This elicited 28 studies only 2 (Regehr et al. 2015; Fleming et al. 2015) of which partially met the inclusion criteria in that they included social work students but were not directly related to learning or development. After modifying the terms by adding: **or** ‘learning’ **or** ‘expertise’ **or** ‘development’, one further study was found (Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty 2016). I then widened the study yet further removing all other search terms and only using the terms ‘professional judgement/judgment’ **or** ‘decision making’ **and** ‘social work’. This resulted in 482 papers. After reading the titles and abstracts I located one further study that included social work students (O’Hare et al. 2013). On reading the abstracts of the papers from this final search I was struck by the number of studies on how social workers make decisions or use their professional judgement that had taken place since the literature review was completed for my CAS in the middle of 2013. I decided this emerging body of discipline-specific knowledge, which has not yet been comprehensively reviewed, could hold some important insights into the

development of the expertise required for social work professional judgement. I therefore amended my inclusion and exclusion criteria to reflect this **(table 2:1)**.

There were 27 studies overall that met the amended inclusion criteria. Dixon-Wood et al. (2006) used a combination of a data extraction tool and general summaries of studies and manual highlighting. I chose to use a data-extraction form for each study and created a simplified version to meet the needs of this review. The categories included were as follows.

- Author(s), article title and year
- Country
- Aim of the study
- Research method(s)
- Participants
- Findings
- Conclusions
- Relevance to my research question
- Points of note

'Relevance' was included as given this is a CIS some studies may have some aspects that are relevant but others that are not. The section on 'points of note' was used for anything that may be of further relevance including limitations in order that I could critically interpret the studies more effectively.

Once I had extracted the data from each study, I concluded that the studies divided into three categories as follows

- How social workers or students enact professional judgement in practice (18 studies – **Appendix 1**)
- How social workers use decision making tools and frameworks and discretion (7 studies **Appendix 2**)
- Research on professional judgement that includes students as participants (4 studies **Appendix 3**) (2 of these are also included in the category under bullet point 1 which will be explained)

An additional way that the studies divided was into the categories of what I have referred to throughout the chapter as '*practice-based studies*' and '*non-practice-based studies*'. 'Practice-based studies' are based on the research of actual social work practice that has taken place either via observation of that practice or by interviews about that practice. By 'non-practice-based' I mean research that was based on simulated scenarios, usually vignettes. This became an important distinction as I progressed through the review as it often had implications to the way in which professional judgement was framed and responded to.

As suggested by Dixon-Wood et al. (2006 p6) I conducted a thematic analysis by inductively identifying "recurrent" themes across the studies through reading and re-reading the completed data extraction forms and the articles.

The studies reviewed cover a number of different countries as can be seen in the tables of studies (**Appendix 1-3**). The way in which decision making in social work takes place can vary between countries. Different laws, policies and cultures govern social work practice so that the findings of every study may not be directly applicable to the UK context. However there is enough similarity of general purpose of social work internationally to warrant inclusion of each of the studies as they can provide some knowledge to inform the research questions.



## **2.3 How social workers enact professional judgement in practice**

Whenever social work professional judgement is written about it is nearly always prefaced by reference to its complexity. It is complex due to several factors. There is usually incomplete information, multiple contextual variables, differences of perspective, an ever changing dynamic as well as the pressure of the potentially catastrophically high stakes involved. The research reviewed demonstrates that there is evidence for this claim to complexity as it is a theme throughout the research studies and particularly emphasised in the practice-based research studies. Hackett & Taylor (2014) found that the process of decision making was not linear. It was based on changing situations and information and decisions were rarely isolated events. They conclude that the process is “complex and fluid” (p2183) and involves a mix of experiential and analytic decision making. Kettle (2017 P33) refers to “the growing accumulation of concerns that made judgements more complex” as well as the temporal nature of decision making. He states that rationality is often assumed for decision making and this fails to address its inherent complexity in practice situations. Helm (2016) discusses the impact of multiple perspectives in the absence of any certainty. In addition to these general findings in relation to complexity, some studies highlight specific complicating factors. Buckland (2016) in her study with Approved Mental Health Practitioners (AMHPs) found there was complexity as a consequence of a multi-disciplinary perspective and discourses of risk. Saltiel (2013) found that complexities within families and family composition had an impact on the process of decision making, particularly in relation to gathering and assessing information.

Whilst all the practice-based studies include aspects of complexity in their findings and/or conclusions, several of the non-practice-based studies did not do so other than in an oblique way. The exceptions to this are Spratt et al. (2015), Regehr et al. (2015) and Rodrigues et al (2015). All three studies interpret the way in which the participants responded to the vignettes (Spratt et al 2015; Rodrigues et al 2015) or standardised patients (Regehr et al 2015) as evidence of the complexity that there would be in real-world social work practice. The use of Vignettes is mentioned as a limitation in many of the studies due to it not being able to replicate social work as it is actually practiced. Spratt et al (2015 p85) link this limitation directly to the issue of complexity. They conclude that vignettes do not “replicate the conditions that pertain in practice”.

Due to the complexity inherent in social work all the studies conclude that an exclusive reliance on actuarial models of decision making is insufficient for social work practice. Hackett & Taylor's (2014) primary finding in their study of 50 children and families' social workers is that analytical decision making was never the sole method of decision making. It was used for specific reasons and always alongside what they call "experiential decision making strategies" (p2191). Regehr et al. (2015 p296) in their study of decisions about suicide risk point to the “unique and distinctive” factors “for which no evidence base exists” which means that “clinical judgment remains a critical component of any assessment of suicide risk even when augmented with actuarial tools”. The need for this clinical or professional judgement is similarly concluded across the studies in different areas of social work.

The evidence of complexity and the need for more than an actuarial approach has relevance to my thesis. Both these factors indicate that professional judgement for social workers requires not just evidence and decision making mechanisms but requires an ability to manage this complexity and steer a path through it in order to

arrive at a professional judgement. The implication is that professional judgement requires a skilled approach to complexity.

The active approach of social workers in employing this skill is referred to throughout the studies despite none of the studies having expertise or skills as their main research focus. A few do make direct mention of the use of skill and the skilfulness of their participant social workers. Astrom et al. (2013 p644) found that the social workers were “skilled in determining a present problem and whether an intervention was needed”. Graham et al. (2015 p21) refers to the importance of “casework skills” and “interpersonal skills” of the social workers. Despite not referring explicitly to social work skill or expertise several studies include references in their findings to what the social workers are doing and use active phrases such as ‘meaning-making’ (Helm 2016); ‘sense-making’ (Kettle 2017); ‘reasoning’ (Enosh & Bayer-Topilsky 2015); ‘weighing up’ (Keddell 2016); ‘construct a narrative’ (Saltiel 2016), “used a range of techniques” (Stanley 2013 p79) and Rodrigues et al. (2015 p46) refers to social worker decisions toward neglect as “effortful”. Six studies (Kettle 2017, Keddell (2016), Helm 2016, Saltiel 2016, Wilkins 2015 and Buckland 2016) refer more specifically to the notion of the skills or expertise of social workers in relation to professional judgement in their findings or conclusions although not always using the language of expertise or skills.

Kettle (2016) in his ethnographic study of tipping points in child protection social work concludes that the “tipping point was reached as an internal process for the worker” (p33). By this he means that although external factors were important it was the way in which the social workers processed these multiple external factors that was relevant to a decision as to whether a tipping point had been reached. He concludes that professional judgement should be considered as “*processual*” rather than “*procedural*”. Keddell (2016 p519) in her critical incident research with child protection social workers found that a decision to remove a child “related not only to identifying abuse, but to

judging how amenable the family was to working on behaviour deemed harmful, what the child's perception of it was, and if the social worker and parent could maintain an 'open' relationship". Similarly to Kettle (2017), she concludes that "all social work judgement relies on processes of site-specific social interpretation" (Keddell 2016 p519). This defines social workers as *interpreting* the situation rather than merely *using* evidence. In Buckland's (2016) study on decision making by AMHPs she found that it was the way in which the social workers were able to problematize mental health and humanise the individual that contributed to their understanding of decision making.

Saltiel (2016) and Wilkins (2015) in their studies on child protection both discuss the skill of the social workers more directly. Saltiel (2016 p2115) comments that "the social workers had to draw on information from numerous sources – members of the public, other professionals, colleagues' case notes – which could be fallible or partial, requiring careful evaluation. Many informal skills were used by social workers in doing this". He also comments on the skilful relationship building and communication and states that these skills were never remarked upon and were dismissed by the workers themselves as being anything out of the ordinary. Wilkins (2015 p408) in his vignette study on referral decisions concludes that his findings "support the view that, when given appropriate time and space to discuss, reflect upon and analyse referrals, many practitioners already show an impressive ability to engage with the complexities they typically contain". Helm's (2016) study could be seen as having more of a direct focus on the expertise of social workers because he seeks to find out, from ethnographic observation, how social workers 'make sense' of children's safeguarding decisions. His findings indicate that they do this by framing the situation and by constructing notions of responsibility, including understandings of their own professional role and the role of the organisations. He sums up the link between the complexity of social work professional judgement and social worker skills by saying "in making such judgements, practitioners must constantly configure their skills, knowledge and values

in unique patterns, working with service users, colleagues and other professionals to respond in ways which satisfy numerous, often competing imperatives” (Helm 2016 p26). He goes on to say that his findings indicate that “sense-making involves careful consideration of multiple perspectives and ways of knowing, often in the absence of any degree of certainty, and this is an arena which requires full and effective use of a range of human sense-making capacities” (p34).

The findings from these studies provide evidence for both the complexity of social work professional judgement and for the skill with which social workers need to, and do, interpret this complexity in order to form professional judgements. What is evident is the holism of what social workers need to do to be effective, how they need to, as Helm (2016 p26) says, “configure their skills”. The relevance of this to my thesis is that if a sophisticated skills portfolio is what is required for professional judgement, over and above the availability of evidence and decision making tools, then it is important to find out how these skills develop and what assists them to do so in order that this can be supported and enabled.

Further scrutiny of these research studies indicate that the way in which the social workers navigate this complexity mainly comprises of three key themes; their approach to uncertainty, the way in which they interpret context and their interaction with others. I will explore these themes in turn in order to understand what skills social work students will need to develop in order to be effective

### ***2.3.1 Approach to uncertainty***

Uncertainty is an inevitable component of professional judgement. If there were certainty a judgement would not need to be made. It is therefore not surprising that all the studies made reference to uncertainty to a greater or lesser degree. Most studies

made reference to uncertainty in their findings in order to substantiate the complex nature of decision making that their participants faced. Some, however, went beyond merely acknowledging uncertainty as being a driver of complexity to considering the significance of the social workers approach to this uncertainty as an important component of 'sense-making' in professional judgement. The most explicit in this regard is Wilkins' (2015) grounded theory interview research based on four vignettes. His research focus was how social workers and managers in an English child and family team analyse referrals. As will be similar in most areas of social work, referrals usually comprise limited information upon which to make a decision and the vignettes of Wilkins' study replicate this limitation. Wilkins found that an important element of effectively managing the decision making was the social workers' approach to what was *not* known and what information was *not* available in the vignettes. He refers to the concept of "known unknowns and unknown unknowns" (Wilkins 2015 p406) and the skill in managing this lack of certainty was in the ability to distinguish between the two. Partly this was by recognising what additional information could inform the situation and partly, as he states "where the participant was able to clearly identify what they did not know (known unknowns), they evidently felt better able to make a judgement regarding the level of risk" (Wilkins 2015 p406). He concludes that there needs to be a "more nuanced" (Wilkins p408) approach to thinking about decision making in this context.

Similarly Spratt et al. (2015) found that some of their participants took what they called a "hedged position" (p85) in their response to risk decision-making based on vignettes. This they saw as a "provisional approach to evidence where more than one outcome is possible" (p85). Thus some of the participants acknowledged that not all the information they needed was present within the vignette and that more or different evidence needed to be sought before a decision should be reached. This "hedged position" could on the one hand be interpreted negatively as a hesitancy in decision

making but equally could be interpreted as a skilled approach to uncertainty and to gaps in information. The decision at the point of a referral is, after all, not what to ultimately conclude about a case but what to do next, which is based just as much on what is not known as on what is known.

Spratt et al.'s (2015) findings indicate that only a third of participants took this hedged position. Other studies also highlight a difference between social workers in relation to their approach to uncertainty or doubt. O'Hare et al. (2013) discusses the possibility that differences between the approach of students and more experienced workers may be due to the students need for certainty but they do not explore this further. However, as discussed **(2.2)** this comparison needs to be treated with caution due to low participant numbers. Kettle (2017) discusses that the relationship between doubt and anxiety interfered with the ability of some participants to make decisions. Stanley (2013 p79) found that there were "subtle differences" in the way the social workers "managed uncertainty" and that "working with uncertainty was a source of concern for many" (Stanley 2013 p80). Something that sets Stanley's findings apart from other research studies is that social workers were seen to rely on others, such as psychologists, to conduct risk assessments. He concludes that this mechanism was used as a way of managing the social workers' uncertainty as psychologist reports "offered a definitive assessment of risk that social workers could treat as trusted, objective and 'scientifically' determined" (Stanley 2013 p79). The way in which Stanley presents it is as a means of the social workers engaging in a type of, what I would interpret as distancing themselves from the management of uncertainty rather than the skilled approach to the unknown as found in Wilkins' (2015) study.

It is accepted that uncertainty is a key component of the complexity of social work professional judgement (Fish & Hardy 2015) and references to uncertainty can be found in the majority of the studies reviewed. There are two further points about

uncertainty prompted by these studies that have relevance to my thesis. Firstly, it may be that a pre-occupation, in social work literature and research, with what social workers do with the information and evidence they have, in order to make decisions, may have obscured the importance of how they effectively respond to and manage what they do not know. Some of the studies, particularly Wilkins' (2015), highlight the importance of a skilled and confident approach toward uncertainty and that gaps in information can be a facilitator of professional judgement. The second relevant point is that all the studies that discuss social workers' approach to uncertainty comment on the variation between different social workers or social work students in terms of their ability to manage this. These two points suggest that an effective approach to uncertainty may be a useful skill and that, given there is variation in expertise with regard to this, it may be something that can be learned and developed. The reason that some social workers are able to manage this skill more effectively than others, or what has helped them to learn this skill, is not something that is explored in any of the reviewed studies.

Debates about the role of uncertainty in social work professional judgement are not new and it has been considered as something to accept and embrace by some (Munro 2011; van de Luitgaarden 2009, White and Taylor 2006; Platt & Turney 2014) rather than something that can be negated via an actuarial approach. Mason (1993) suggests that uncertainty can either be a path to creativity or a path to paralysis for professionals. Both these responses to uncertainty are indicated in the research studies.

### ***2.3.2 Interpreting context***

The second theme prevalent in managing complexity relates to the social workers' interpretation of context. There are two ways in which it features. Firstly there



emerges a picture across the research studies of social workers displaying a drive to contextualise the circumstances they are presented with in order to assist them to make a decision or arrive at a judgement. This sense of context relates to the drive to situate the decision within the circumstances, approaches and responses of the service users involved. The second way in which context is relevant to the studies is the structural and cultural influence on the process or framing of professional judgement. This can be best illustrated by comparative studies of social work professional judgement in different countries (Hyun & Adams 2016; Benbenishty et al 2015) but also the impact of resources, which is mentioned in two studies (Saltiel 2016 Graham et al 2015) and the analysis of the impact of cultural norms (Buckland 2016; Keddell 2016). Thus the findings present a picture indicating that professional judgement needs to be *situationally interpreted* but also it is *interpreted within its structural and cultural situation*. I will draw from the research to illustrate both these points.

All the practice-based studies found that social workers did draw on contextual factors to inform their professional judgement and most studies concluded that doing so was an important feature of social work professional judgement. Some studies emphasised the significance of this more than others. As mentioned previously, Keddell (2016) concludes that social work professional judgement relies on site-specific interpretation. Similarly, Saltiel (2013 p22) says that the social workers in his study had a "situated awareness of the complex diversities of families' lives". Hackett & Taylor (2014) found that family reaction, known history and prior experience of the family were the most influential types of information for experiential decision making. They found that social workers needed to react to changing situations and "changing levels of information" (p2193). This indicates that contextual information about the families or the environment was not static information to be collected and used as a one off component of the decision being made but required constant interpretation and re-interpretation. Kettle (2017 p32) found that in addition to the social workers' "internal

mechanisms" that influenced child protection "tipping points", there were also "external triggers" (p34) such as changing family circumstance. Taking all these studies into account, it can be concluded that when real-world social work professional judgement is studied it reveals that this judgement is reliant on interpreting context and that the fluctuating dynamic of that context means social workers need to be able to constantly re-interpret context.

A distinction can be drawn between the practice-based and the non-practice-based studies in relation to professional judgement being situationally interpreted. The non-practice-based studies, the majority of which use vignettes, were obviously not embedded in real-world context which is dynamic and multi-dimensional. As mentioned, several of the studies cite this as a limitation. However, there may still be evidence to be gleaned about the contextually situated nature of social work professional judgement from some of these studies. Whereas the practice-based studies revealed a situated approach to professional judgement via the evidence of social workers drawing on context, some of the non-practice-based studies reveal that social workers appeared to want to draw on context even in its absence. This can be seen in the studies by Wilkins (2015), Spratt et al (2015) and O'Hare et al (2013).

Wilkins (2015 p406) found that participants "demonstrated a desire to use any available information regarding the child's family history or wider circumstances to place the 'pre-sentencing issue' of the referral within a context". Wilkins' choice of the word 'desire' here is interesting. It suggests more than just a sense of obligation to include any presented information. It indicates an active drive to seek contextual information because this is what assists decision making. O'Hare et al. (2013 p202) in their study of social workers' compulsory intervention in mental health decisions state that when asked generally about managing risk the participants responses "involved discussions about recovery in a wider context rather than just symptoms and cure".

The authors refer to this as "holistic narratives" (O'Hare et al. p201) and contrast it to the way in which participants responded to the risk as presented within the vignettes saying that these responses were "supplemented by conjecture..based on limited evidence" (O'Hare et al. p200). This may indicate that given an opportunity social workers strive to seek contextual information from which to form "holistic narratives" but if they are thwarted from doing this, by a scenario that has limited contextual information they, unsurprisingly, resort to conjecture in order to provide the requested response. This has some resonance with Spratt et al.'s (2015 p76) participants who chose a "hedged" position. The authors found that several wanted to gather further information before coming to a recommendation. They conclude that there are limitations for research in taking the decision out of the contextualising situation of real practice including the significant limitation of it being "emotionally decontextualized" (Spratt et al. 2015 p78). Few of the studies refer to the emotional context which is surprising given the now generally accepted position of the role of emotion in decision making. This would seem a fruitful area for more targeted research within the specific field of social work professional judgement.

In addition to the social workers' desire to situationally interpret the service user context, some of the research studies indicate that professional judgement is influenced by the context within which it is practiced. This is best illustrated by international comparative research. Of the studies reviewed, two specifically sought to compare social workers' professional judgement in different countries. Hyun & Adams (2016) compared risk decisions in child abuse between South Korean and US social workers. Benbenishty et al. (2015) compared social workers' judgements in child welfare between Israel, Netherlands, Northern Ireland and Spain. Both studies concluded that there were differences in approach and decisions and that these differences appeared to be embedded in cultural and policy differences between countries. Both studies were based on vignettes.

Hyun & Adams (2016) found that there were differences between countries about whether and at what stage a decision would be taken for the removal of a child as well as the extent to which the attitude of the parents was influential to that decision. There was indication that South Korean social workers were less likely to challenge parents as they lacked professional confidence. As discussed **(2.2)** this study does have some limitations due to sample size and discrepancy of compared groups. Nevertheless it is interesting in its indication of potential cultural impact.

Benbenishty et al.'s (2015) study included 828 participants across the four countries. They concluded that there were differences in child welfare attitudes between countries and this led to differences in decisions. Northern Irish social workers were more likely to want to keep children and families together and choose short term accommodation options. This was the opposite in Spain where they had the least negative view of foster care. Dutch and Israeli social workers were unlikely to choose short term options and Israeli social workers had the least negative view toward residential care. The authors suggest that these difference may be influenced by "historical developments" (Benbenishty et al. p64) in each country. Northern Irish and Dutch social workers had negative attitudes toward residential care and they have a history of abuse scandals in care homes whereas Israeli social workers had a positive attitude toward residential care which may be linked to the tradition of residential communities and collectivism. The authors state that evaluations in Spain indicate that there is good stability and minimal placement breakdown in foster care plus they have very few preventative or support agencies. They suggest that this may be the reason that more child removal is suggested because foster care placements are perceived as achieving positive outcomes. There were also differences in the attitude toward family involvement in decisions with Northern Irish social workers being much more supportive of this than those from the other countries.

Both these studies provide indication that the same risk and circumstance can give rise to different decisions by social workers as a consequence of the cultural and policy influences of the countries within which the decisions are being made. They also indicate the extent to which decisions are influenced by what is an acceptable and available resource response. Few of the other studies in this review specifically identify the influence of resources on professional judgement. The exceptions to this is Saltiel (2016) who concluded that referral decisions were influenced by limited resources and Graham et al. (2015) who found that workload and resources was one of the factors that was statistically significant in its effect on whether a child was placed in foster care.

Two studies indicate the way in which social workers demonstrated awareness of prevailing assumptions or stereotypes and were able to counter these. Keddell's (2016) study on how discourses of family maintenance are used to inform decisions in child and family social work in New Zealand and Buckland's (2016) study on decisions by AMHPs in the UK. Keddell found that concepts of family maintenance and best interest for the child underpinned the social workers decision making rationales. She concludes that rather than merely an adherence to neoliberal concepts of family blame, social workers drive for family maintenance derived from an understanding of children's needs as being relational. Buckland found that the social workers decision making about compulsory powers was influenced by them problematizing the cultural and societal concept of mental disorder and by humanising the individual. She indicates in her study what appear to be social workers deconstructing the 'Othering' of those experiencing severe mental ill health and that this deconstruction informed their judgement. What the findings and conclusion of these two studies have in common is social workers countering the prevailing cultural norms. In other words they are not unwittingly being influenced by the prevailing cultural and societal structures and are bringing to bear a critical approach to these structures in order to form their judgement.

The important point here for understanding how social workers develop the skills of professional judgement may not be so much that cultural and structural context *does* influence professional judgement but the need for social workers to be *aware* and appreciate this contextual influence. Few of the reviewed studies explored this critical dimension of professional judgement enacted by social workers. It may be the case that these issues are explored in greater depth in research more specifically related to that topic. Nevertheless, this would be a useful area of future research into social work professional judgement.

One further aspect of context is worthy of note, not for its prevalence across the studies but for its potential significance to the research endeavour of this thesis. Helm (2016 p31) in his ethnographic observation of social workers' safeguarding judgements concludes that they "made sense of data in the context of their understanding of their professional role and the wider role of their organisation". In relation to this he also concludes that their understanding of responsibility was important, both their own and that of others. This indicates a link between awareness of one's professional role and responsibility with the sense-making required for professional judgement.

### **2.3.3 *Interaction with others***

The third theme in relation to managing complexity, in addition to approach to uncertainty and interpreting context is professional judgement being an interactive rather than an individual endeavour. Most research into social workers' professional judgement is conducted on an individual basis and this is particularly true of all the non-practice-based studies that were reviewed. In these studies individual social workers were asked what judgement they would make given a set of circumstances, usually via a vignette. However, all three ethnographic studies (Helm 2016; Stanley 2013; Saltiel 2016), the only studies reviewed where real-world social work decision making was

observed, found social workers form their professional judgement through interaction with others. Helm (2016 p29) found that "workers are observed to discuss cases with numerous people in numerous ways throughout the day". Saltiel (2016 p2115) found "there was a good deal of collegial discussion" and social workers drew on information from numerous sources including other professionals. Stanley (2013) also found this to be the case and discusses talk between workers, including during "down-time" (p70), as a rich source of creating new forms of knowledge.

There was also evidence of the importance of interaction in the other practice-based studies where observation was not the research method used. Kettle (2017) found that one of the factors in the process of reaching "tipping points" was "interactions, often complex, with other professionals" (p36). He also found that it was through discussions, including, but not exclusively, supervision, that social workers were able to reach a "gradual realisation" (p35) that a different course of action needed to be taken. Rodrigues et al (2015 p46) discusses "the influence of others" being evident in their study. Regehr et al (2015 p295) refer to "consultation with colleagues" as part of what practitioners rely on.

Studies that mention interaction, found it to be positive in the decision process. Some see it as a possible way of enabling critically reflective approach and a minimisation of bias (Helm 2016) though others warn against the possible undue influence (Rodrigues et al 2015) particularly where social workers show "deference" to others professionals (Stanley 2013 P77). The indication from the studies reviewed is that, as Helm (2016 p27) states, "sense making is not necessarily an individual activity". This is something that has received little attention in research on social work professional judgement. I would argue that the way in which research studies are often conducted, particularly those using non practice-based methods, conspires against illuminating this interactive component of professional judgement given that they often exclude any opportunity for

interaction or discussion by focusing exclusively on an individual's professional judgement or decision making. It is possible that research on supervision rather than professional judgement would highlight at least some aspect of this. A review of the research on social work supervision is beyond the scope of this thesis and I would argue that the absence of any substantial discussion on this in the social work professional judgement literature is still worthy of note, even if aspects of professional judgement were to be found in the literature on supervision or elsewhere.

## **2.4 Social workers using decision making tools, frameworks and discretion**

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, in addition to the research on sense-making and reasoning in social work professional judgement, the literature search revealed that there were some studies specifically focused on the use of tools or frameworks and others focused on the use of professional discretion. This is relevant to this thesis as it illuminates an aspect of social workers' approach to professional judgement. By 'tools and frameworks' I am referring to a range of mechanisms that are designed to assist decision making in social work. I will not define this further here as the studies incorporate a number of different types. The primary focus for research studies is usually either the use of tools and frameworks or the use of professional discretion. Review of the research indicates that a focus on tools and frameworks is usually located within the field of social work with children and families whereas a focus on discretion is usually within the field of social work with adults. I will discuss them in turn but argue that they are two sides of the same equation and both fit into the wider debate about the extent to which social workers exercise professional autonomy.



### **2.4.1 Tools and frameworks**

In the literature search for my CAS I identified two studies that had a specific focus on the use of tools and frameworks (Gillingham & Humphreys 2010; Pithouse et al. 2011). Both were large scale ethnographic studies that researched the use of structured decision making tools and systems in children's services; Gillingham & Humphreys in Australia and Pithouse et al in the UK. The primary finding in both studies was that these structured decision making tools were not being used by social workers in the way that was intended and tools were manipulated to fit decisions already made.

It is indicated in both studies that the complexities involved in social work decision making meant that, as Pithouse et al. (2011p160) state, an "indelibly individual set of calculations" had to be made that required a skilled approach from the social worker. They also conclude that the fragmentation of the story of the service users lives resulting from these tools and systems meant that there was often a "loss of narrative" (p173) which impeded the situated understanding that informs professional judgement. This resonates with discussion on the importance of the interpretation and re-interpretation of changing situational context **(2.3.2)**. An observation made by Gillingham and Humphreys (2010) was that social workers who were less experienced found tools and frameworks more useful than those who were experienced. This could be because effectively interpreting situational context requires considerable skill and less experienced social workers may need assistance in this. Gillingham and Humphreys (2010) also made the point that the use of tools may inhibit inexperienced workers from developing the analytical skills necessary due to an over-reliance on external frames for decision making.

The updated literature search for this thesis produced four further studies about the use social workers made of decision making tools and frameworks, all from different countries (Vaswani & Merone 2014 - Scotland; Hoybye-Mortensen 2015 - Denmark; Alfandari 2017 - Israel; Gillingham 2017 – Australia). The findings of three of the studies (Hoybye-Mortensen 2015; Alfandari 2017 and Gillingham 2017) were similar to the earlier two studies mentioned above in that the tools were rarely used as a mechanism to arrive at a decision point but instead used either as a recording device to complete after decisions are made (Alfandari 2017; Hoybye-Mortensen 2015); adapted to fit the discretion of the social worker (Hoybye-Mortensen 2015) or used alongside expertise and intuition to check decisions (Gillingham 2017). Vaswani & Merone's (2014) large quantitative study has a different focus than the other three in that its aim is to research the predictive accuracy of a specific decision making tool on recidivism in young offenders. The reason this study meets the inclusion criteria for this literature review is that it considers how social workers use the professional override mechanism built into it. The findings were that the tool has a high predictive accuracy rate for risk of recidivism and that professional override was used in only 14% of the cases. Their conclusions were that professionals should have confidence in the accuracy of the tool but should not "automatically disregard their judgement about an individual's level of risk and need" (Vaswani & Merone 2014 p2177) and that more research is needed to find out how professionals can be supported in their decision making. These studies all support the findings that decision making tools do not negate the role of skilled professional judgement and when authentic practice is researched it is found to involve skilled situational interpretation by social workers.

There was some enthusiasm found for use of the tools in Hoybye-Mortensen's and Gillingham's studies with views expressed by social workers that they were helpful to "check impressions" (Gillingham 2017 p52); encourage the inclusion of a broader perspective and to state the source of information (Hoybye-Motensen 2017). However,

Alfandari (2017) found that there was a negative view of the standardised package of decision making tools because they were seen to be imposed without reference to what was needed to assist social workers, seen merely as additional work that replicated existing skilled practice and did nothing to address the limitations caused by high caseloads. Alfandari (2017 p221) also found that there was “a profound reliance of front-line workers on their colleagues as sources of professional knowledge in their daily child protection work”. This resonates with the idea of interactive professional judgement as discussed **(2.3.3)**

There were indications of differences within the research studies. Firstly there were differences in the types of decision making tools and frameworks that are being discussed. Hoybye-Mortensen (2015) and Gillingham (2017) researched the use of a range of tools and found differences in the perceived usefulness between frameworks that assisted social workers to think through their practice (Gillingham 2017 p51), leaving room for discretion (Hoybye-Motensen 2015), and those that were more prescriptive and actuarial in intention. The latter were found by many, though not all, to be unhelpful as they inhibited expertise. The other difference noted in several of the studies was the differences between the social workers’ understanding of the tools. Hoybye-Mortensen (2015) noted that social workers who understood the theory behind the tools and frameworks were more likely to be positively disposed toward them and find them helpful.

To conclude, the studies indicate that skilled professional judgement is still required for social work due to its complexity and due to the way in which social workers deploy their expertise by building up narratives and by interpreting context. Tools and frameworks were rarely used in isolation but could be helpful, particularly if they helped to focus the social workers own professional judgement. This way of benefitting from the use of tools and frameworks indicates the need for greater skill rather than negating

the need for skill and is summed up by Hoybye-Mortensen's (2015 p613) observation that what is important is the "interplay between the form and the caseworker".

### **2.4.2 Discretion**

Research into the use of discretion by social workers has been framed differently to research into the use of specific decision making tools and frameworks but I would argue arrives at similar conclusions. There is a body of research structured around the concept of street-level bureaucracy developed by Lipsky (1980). This is the concept that front-line workers use their own discretion when administering social policy. Street-level bureaucracy has been used as a lens to understand the extent to which social workers, primarily in adults' services, use discretion in the decisions or recommendations they make, particularly in terms of allocation of resource. In my CAS I discussed this and concluded that studies by Evans & Harris (2004); Evans (2010) and Ellis (2011) found that social workers are finding the spaces within the managerialism agenda to use their own discretion. Further studies were identified in the updated literature search (Evans 2013; Jessen & Tufte 2014; Scourfield 2015; Evans 2016). All studies upheld the findings that there was considerable discretion used by social workers, although Jessen & Tufte (2014) found that on some measures social workers perceived they had less room for discretion in a changed welfare arrangement in Norway.

The continued use of discretion in adults' services, despite the prevalence of prescriptive policies, procedures and eligibility criteria, could be viewed as similar to the 'work-around' approach found in the research on the use of tools and frameworks in children's services. What is indicated for both sets of studies is that social workers make choices with regard to the frameworks presented to them. The social workers are not only using their discretion and professional judgement with regard to the

substantive choices being made about a case but also about whether and how to use aspects of a particular framework or procedure.

Similar to the studies about tools and frameworks, the picture is more complex than a clear choice of adhering to or disregarding rules and requirements. Evans (2013 p752) found that attitudes toward organisational rules were broadly split between those social workers who emphasised the benefit of rules and the need to limit discretion and those who emphasised the “desired goal” which often requires “wide-ranging” discretion over organisational rules. He also states that these attitudes were not delineated according to experience, with both the newly qualified and the most experienced falling into the second category. Evans (2013) guards against a simple view of emphasising discretion as professionally preferable to emphasising rules. He found those who emphasised rules often did so out of a desire for equal treatment and fairness to the service user. He also states that adherence to these perspectives was not static but “adapted and changed for reasons of pragmatism and principled commitments” (Evans 2013 p739). This supports the view that social workers are making active choices and adapting to context and are interpreting and re-interpreting this context. Evans (2013 p746) refers to social workers and their managers together interpreting rules “in a way that conformed to their ideas of professionalism in social work”. Scourfield (2015 p929) presents review meetings of older people’s care as a “negotiated reality between participants”. These last two comments also indicate a similarity between this body of research and that discussed previously regarding interactive professional judgement **(2.3.3)**. Research on social work discretion has moved beyond Lipsky’s (1980) original focus of the individual worker and their use of rules to acknowledge that this involves interaction with managers (Evans 2010, Scourfield 2015), senior managers (Evans 2016) and others outside the agency (Scourfield 2015).

## **2.5 Research on professional judgement that includes social work students**

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, when undertaking the CAS I found eight studies on professional judgement or decision making that included social work students as participants. The studies could be grouped into two categories those that evaluated pedagogical approaches or the impact of a taught programme that had taken place within university (Bellefeuille & Hemingway 2006; O'Sullivan 2006; Head 2008; Platt 2011; Preston-Shoot & McKimm 2012) and those that compared social work students decision making with either qualified social workers (Dury-Hudson 1999; Landau 1999; O'Connor and Leonard 2013) or student nurses (Yeung et al. 2010). It was not the intention of these studies to explore how social work students learned or developed skills for professional judgement but rather the differences in approach to, or influences on, decision making between each group. On synthesising these studies I found that confidence appeared to be a significant factor that differentiated students from more experienced staff and this lack of confidence manifest in difficulties in challenging others.

The updated literature search for this thesis only produced four further studies that included social work students as participants (O'Hare et al. 2013; Regehr et al. 2015; Fleming et al. 2015; Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty 2016). The studies by O'Hare et al. and Regehr et al. were previously discussed in relation to social workers enacting professional judgement (2.3). This is because, despite the inclusion of students as participants, the focus of these two studies was not specifically on their status as students or as learners but rather they were included alongside qualified workers as a cohort of participants to consider clinicians professional judgement in suicide risk (Regehr et al. 2015) and implementing mental health law (O'Hare et al. 2013). Some limited comments were made in these studies to differentiate students from other

participants. Regehr et al. (2015) found that students were less likely to believe that the standardised patient required hospitalisation. The authors linked this finding with participant age in the study. O'Hare et al. (2013) stated that some students struggled to provide a contextual narrative with regard to risk decisions. However, the primary focus of these studies was not to research students learning and development in relation to professional judgement.

The studies by Fleming et al. (2015) and Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty (2016) have more of a substantive reason for having social work students as participants as they both sought to find out the role or effect of professional expertise on risk decisions. They do this by comparing social work students with more experienced social workers via quantitative vignette studies. Fleming et al. (2015) found that students rated risks higher than qualified workers and they were more likely to be influenced by emotive factors. Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty (2016) found little difference between the three groups of students, social workers with little experience and more experienced social workers. However, there were indications that students were more risk averse. They were also less likely to involve the parents or children in the decision making. Nevertheless there were similarities in the actual assessment decisions made between students and qualified workers. This could indicate that despite the students making similar risk decisions as qualified social workers, they were more concerned about the risk. Neither study explored what contributed to this difference or what did or could effect change between the student state and the qualified state.

Any identifiable themes are limited given that there are so few studies with students as participants, with none focusing on how students develop or learn. However, there was indication of the potential for rating risk higher but little difference in the decisions made about risk between students and qualified social workers.

## **2.6 Social workers and professional judgement: Conclusion**

The research that has been reviewed supports the view that decision making in social work needs an approach that is more than “technical-rational” (Polkinghorne 2004 p27) or “rational choice” (van de Luitgaarden 2009 p243). It requires what Polkinghorne (2004 p2) refers to as “the situated judgement of professionals”. The research substantiates the claim that professional judgment in social work is complex and dynamic. It requires social workers to be able to actively use uncertainty to facilitate that judgement and requires them to be able to interpret and re-interpret the context that informs that judgement. I would go further and say that there are indications that it is not just good practice to consider context when making decisions but that it is the situated context that helps social workers reach that professional judgement. It enables them to weigh-up (Keddell 2016), make-sense (Helm 2016) and create a narrative (Pithouse et al 2010; Saltiel 2016) from the evidence they have and from the gaps in that evidence. Social workers also need to be able to interact with (Hoybye-Mortensen 2015) and make active choices about the tools, frameworks, policies and procedures presented to them in a critical way in order to effect considered professional judgement whether that choice results in an adherence to these frameworks or an adaptation of them (Evans 2013).

A finding from this review of the research, that has received limited attention in social work, is the interactive nature of professional judgement. All the studies that observed social work professional judgement taking place commented on the way in which professional judgement was formed via interaction with others and other studies made reference to this too. This was largely considered as having a positive impact but could be negative if social workers displayed “deference” (Stanley 2013 p77) to other professionals or were reluctant to challenge (Hyun & Adams 2016).



These findings have an impact on the way we understand the skills needed for professional judgement. As Rodrigues et al (2015 p46) states, social work decision making is “effortful”. It requires more than the availability of evidence and the application of actuarial models. It requires skilled interpretation, critical awareness and purposeful interaction with colleagues as well as service users. What the research studies indicate is an active approach by social workers who are able to and aware that they need to, “configure their skills, knowledge and values in unique patterns” (Helm 2016 p26). This has implications for the development of social work students’ skills for professional judgement.

I use the phrase ‘skills *for*’ rather than ‘skills *of*’ professional judgement purposely. These research studies demonstrate that what social work students need to develop to be able to effectively use their own professional judgement is much more than the skill of the decision making process itself. As has been seen, a whole range of skills need to be in place to enable a social worker to arrive at a point where a decision can be made and this includes the way in which skills interact with knowledge and values. The research for this thesis focuses on how students develop, and are enabled to develop, this wider set of skills that are required for effective professional judgement in social work. What this literature search has shown is that there is a gap in research into what enables students to develop the quite considerable skills necessary for effective professional judgement. In order to understand this it is necessary to consider literature that might explain how this development takes place.

## **2.7 Professional expertise and professional learning**

Having reviewed research on social workers enacting professional judgement I now turn to considering expertise and learning for professional practice. It is not possible within the scope of this thesis to present a full literature review encompassing all research into professional learning so I have drawn on research and conceptualisations from key exponents of theory in the field. I will begin with a discussion of accounts of expertise development **(2.7.1)** then consider learning in social work practice placements and conceptual ideas and findings from research into workplace learning **(2.7.2)**.

### ***2.7.1 Accounts of expertise development***

Professional judgement is intrinsic in accounts of expertise development. Decision making is not only an explicit component of models of skill acquisition (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1986) but as Benner (2001 pxxiii) states the study of expertise development “calls attention” to “discretionary judgement used in actual clinical situations”.

Stage accounts, with progression from novice to expert, have been influential and have their basis in the model of skills acquisition proposed by Dreyfus & Dreyfus (1986) which derived from their observation of various work and social activities **(Table 2:2)**.

**Table 2:2 Stages of skill acquisition Dreyfus & Dreyfus (1986 p50)**

Skill Level	Components	Perspective	Decision	Commitment
Novice	Context-free	None	Analytical	Detached
Advanced Beginner	Context-free & situational	None	Analytical	Detached
Competent	Context-free & situational	Chosen	Analytical	Detached understanding & deciding. Involved in outcome
Proficient	Context-free & situational	Experienced	Analytical	Involved understanding. Detached deciding
Expert	Context-free & situational	Experienced	Intuitive	Involved

In this model they map level of expertise to aspects they consider important to expertise which can be seen across the top row of the table. This model was adapted by Benner (1984) to research nursing expertise via critical incidents of practice which is considered to be the first comprehensive application of the Dreyfus & Dreyfus model to professional practice (Eraut 1994; Cheetham & Chivers 1996). Fook et al. (1997; 2000) later used the Dreyfus & Dreyfus model to research the progression of social work expertise via a longitudinal study using critical incidents and vignettes.

Winch (2010 p138) describes such stage models as “fluency theories”. This is because one of the key stated features differentiating ‘experts’ is that they operate on a tacit level without conscious reference to the mechanics of the skill being employed or to the propositional knowledge underpinning their actions. As can be seen in the Dreyfus & Dreyfus model (**Table 2:2**), the claim is that experts’ decision making becomes ‘intuitive’. Thus the progression of expertise is toward an ever more fluent exercise of practice. One of Winch’s criticisms of this account is its focus on the action of the individual rather than the outcome thus it is not a typology of expert practice. Fook et al. (2000 p179) suggests that a weakness in the model is that it makes no

distinction between experienced routinized practice and expert practice which can be “innovative and creative”.

Dreyfus & Dreyfus' (1986) emphasis on intuition rather than reasoning to define an expert (Eraut 1994) implies that deliberation or practice reasoning is a facet to overcome on our journey toward expertise, yet as has been discussed in Chapter 1 (1:4) deliberation is considered by many as the cornerstone of professional judgement (Schwab 1970; Reid 1979; Fish & Coles 1998; Carr et al. 2011; Tripp 2011 and Rutter and Brown 2012). Similarly, the research reviewed into social workers and professional judgement indicates that skilled social workers still deliberate with others. Klein (1999) suggests that what we perceive as 'intuition' is actually a lack of recognition that we are still drawing on experience and knowledge to make decisions. Winch (2010 p142) states that “mature action, including that of experts, depends on successfully taking into account all the relevant factors within a situation” requiring “human agency directed to a particular field of activity” and he questions the possibility of a universal theory of expertise that is “context free” (p136). Similarly, Dall’Alba & Sandberg (2006 p388) suggest that stage models overlook the need for “an understanding of, and in, practice” and therefore neglect to consider the nature of the skill being developed.

A limitation of particular relevance to this thesis is, as Eraut (1994) points out, that the Dreyfus & Dreyfus model does not explain *how* expertise is developed from experience. Despite criticisms, the stage model is valued for its contribution in providing an account of expertise (Winch 2010, Eraut 1994). Fook et al. (2000 p176) present their research on social work expertise as an account of the “features of different stages of expertise development” and do not pre-suppose that this explains how such development takes place. As such there is value in considering Fook et al.’s (1997; 2000) research as it provides a rare account of the features of expertise of the

graduating social work student which is the stage of the participants of this study (see Chapter 3).

Fook et al. (2000) conclude that the stage of the graduating students in their study mostly equates to Dreyfus & Dreyfus' 'advanced beginner' (**Table 2:2**). Their summary is that graduating social work students were "semi-involved, but ultimately detached participants in situations" (Fook et al. 2000 p60). They note that the students were developing confidence through having to tackle increasingly complex situations but still focused on the individual "at the expense of examining contextual factors" (p58). They found that values were "in little evidence" and social work was reduced to a "technical task" as they focused on "getting the job done" (p58). They conclude that the graduating students did not "truly" demonstrate their ability to contextualise or be reflexive but remained "wary observers of themselves and their own performances who largely remained detached from situations" (p59). As I will discuss (Chapter 4) this presentation of graduating social work students differs considerably from the presentation of the students in the research for this thesis and I will consider the possible reasons for this.

### ***2.7.2 Professional learning in practice***

The practice placement continues to be considered pivotal to social work student learning. In the UK the practice placement has long been considered a crucial and influential element of social work education for students and one which they remember (Thompson et al. 1994; Doel & Shardlow 1996). Ford et al. (2005 p395) highlight that placements change social work students and "affect the kind of practitioners that students become". Yet despite increased research and theorising about the practice placement there remains limited understanding of what gives rise to learning during placement. Parker (2006) identified this gap in research over a decade ago and recent

studies still comment that research into learning on placement is limited (Smith et al. 2015) or “scarce” (Lam 2017 p2).

A search of the literature confirmed this. I used the following search terms ‘social work student’ **or** ‘social work education’ **and** ‘practice learning’ **or** ‘practice placement’ **or** ‘field\* placement’ **or** ‘practice education’ **or** ‘field\* education’. This revealed an increase in articles on practice learning from 2009 onwards. Similar to Parker (2006) I found research on student satisfaction, the relationship between student and supervisor and specific aspects of student competence. In addition there has been an increase in research on preparation for placement; placement failure; international placements. Two recent studies researched the type of activities, from a pre-defined list, that social work students undertake in placement, one in Australia (Smith et al. 2015), the other in Northern Ireland (Cleak et al. 2016). The titles of these two articles “The inside story” and “What are they really doing?” indicate a continuing perception of a hidden practice about which little is known. Smith et al. (2015) and Cleak et al.’s (2016) research provides useful evidence of what learning opportunities occur but evidence of whether and how these activities might promote learning remains limited.

Research that report students’ satisfaction with placements may provide some indication of what has helped learning, although it should be acknowledged that satisfaction does not necessarily equate to effective learning (Fortune 2001; Parker 2006). Highly rated aspects of placement include a relationship with the supervisor that is both supportive (Killick 2005; Lefevre 2005; Wilson & Kelly 2010) and constructively challenging (Fortune 2001; Knight 2000); Observing and working with professional role-models (Bogo 2006; Fortune 2001; Maidmont 2000) and being observed and provided with feedback (Maidmont 2000; Fortune 2001).

Raskin, Wayne & Bogo (2008 p176) reviewed research into social work field education in North America, New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong and Israel and found that field instruction is valued if it includes the following

- (1) Instructor characteristics and behaviours that offer support, including providing balanced feedback on students' practice
- (2) Frequent field instruction sessions of duration
- (3) Direct learning activities such as observing and working with professional role models
- (4) Reflective and conceptual learning activities such as providing a conceptual framework for understanding students' practice, assistance in analysing cases and integrating theory and practice, including concepts studied in the classroom
- 5) Activities that encourage student self-critique

This review does not include research from the UK, however the structure of practice learning is similar so it is likely to have some generalizable relevance to the UK context.

Another way, beyond student satisfaction, by which we might understand how learning for professional practice takes place, is to consider research into workplace learning including informal learning. This research typically involves qualified practitioners rather than students but does provide some evidence, as well as theoretical understanding, of what enables learning for professional practice. A full review of workplace learning is not possible within the scope of this thesis so I will firstly present Eraut's (2004a; 2007) conceptual analysis of what promotes informal workplace learning based on his and colleagues. I will then outline two multi-professional research studies into workplace learning; Cheetham & Chivers (2001; 2005), which I have included due to its comprehensive and influential research (Bogo 2010); and Webster-Wright (2009) which

I have included due to her research into authentic professional learning, a concept I used in my research (Chapter 3). I will also discuss two small-scale studies on workplace informal learning in social work from Italy (Gola 2009) and Sweden (Avby 2015), which were the only studies I located that are exclusively about social work informal learning.

Eraut (2004a), drawing on his research into early and mid-career professionals (Eraut et al. 1998; 2004b; Eraut 2000), presents a conceptual analysis of informal learning in the workplace that includes what is learned, how it is learned and what factors affect learning. How learning takes place and the factors affecting it has relevance to this thesis. There are differences in that I am researching students who were undertaking a programme of formal learning so all their learning cannot be categorised as 'informal' but, as Eraut (2004a p266) states "so much learning goes unrecognised" and this is also likely to be so for those formally engaged in learning programmes, particularly where learning in a practice setting is a prominent component.

Eraut (2004a p266/7) found the following types of activity "gave rise to learning".

- Participating in group activities
- Working alongside others
- Tackling challenging tasks
- Working with clients

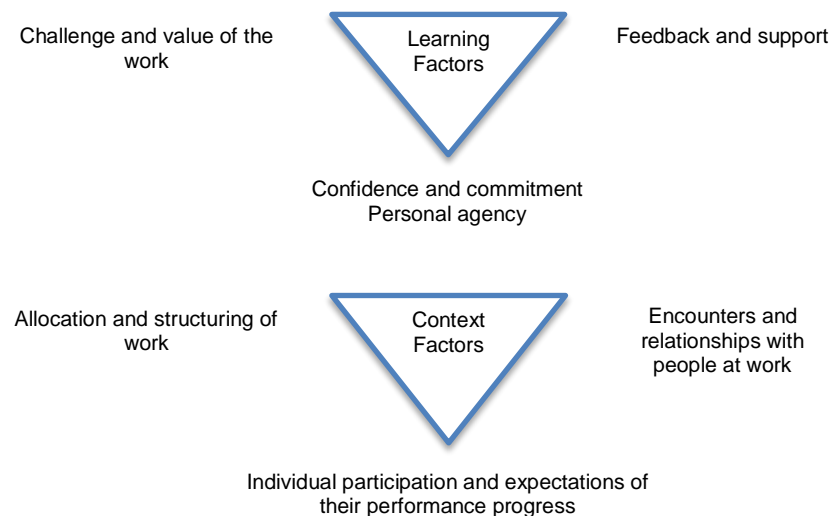
Eraut (2004a) states that learning was "embedded" (p269) within these processes but that their success was also dependant on the quality of relationships. He notes the importance of the balance between support in the moment and longer term support stating that often "informal support from whoever was available was more important for learning than were formally designated helpers" (p267). He comments that there were



those who were proactive in seeking relationships with a “wider network of knowledge resource people” and those who were not and that asking questions was important for learning (p267). Feedback was “often vital” to learning, but whilst short-term feedback was in evidence there was a lack of strategic feedback which gave “even the most confident workers” a sense of “uncertainty” and diminishing of commitment (p267).

Eraut's (2004a; 2007) conceptualisation of factors effecting learning can be seen in (Fig 2:1).

**Figure 2:1 Factors affecting learning at work: the two triangle model Eraut (2007 p418)**



Within this typology Eraut (2004a p269) highlights the “overwhelming importance of confidence” which he cites as a dependant factor placed within a triangular relationship with challenge and support. He states

Much learning at work occurs through doing things and being proactive in seeking learning opportunities, and this requires *confidence*. Moreover, we noted that confidence arose from successfully meeting *challenges* in one's work, while the confidence to take on such challenges depended on the extent to which learners felt *supported* in that endeavour. Thus there is a triangular relationship between challenge, support and confidence. (Eraut et al. 2000). If there is neither a challenge nor sufficient support to encourage a person to seek out or respond to a challenge, then confidence declines and with it the motivation to learn. (Eraut 2004a p269)

Eraut's (1994) theory on knowledge also has relevance to expertise development and thus to this thesis. Based on observations from his research he refutes the idea of a linear process of knowledge acquisition leading to knowledge use in practice, finding instead that knowledge is "reinterpreted" (p33) in use creating a "symbiotic relationship" of theory and practice (p20). He suggests that knowledge "may need to be used before it can acquire any significant meaning for the user" (1994 p33). This resonates with the studies reviewed on social work professional judgement which indicate that the situated nature of professional judgement meant that social workers sought to contextualise knowledge and information so that they could make sense of the whole. In order to make appropriate use of knowledge in the workplace Eraut (2004b p256) suggests a process takes place that involves the interrelation of the following five stages

1. The extraction of potentially relevant knowledge from the context(s) of its acquisition and previous use
2. Understanding the new situation – a process that often depends on informal social learning
3. Recognising what knowledge and skills are relevant
4. Transforming them to fit the new situation
5. Integrating them with other knowledge and skills in order to think/act/communicate in the new setting

This process of knowledge use, set alongside the factors affecting learning (**Fig 2:1**) and the identified need for confidence, indicates a learning endeavour that is complex and relies on the interrelation of many dependant factors. In addition given the complexity identified in social work professional judgement, as presented in the review of the research, the development of skills for professional judgement for social work students presents a particularly challenging arena.

Other research studies on workplace or informal learning have similar findings to that of Eraut's. Cheetham & Chivers (2001) undertook research in the UK into how professionals learn in practice. The research included 20 professions including social work. 80 professionals were interviewed and a survey of professionals from 6 "representative" professions was conducted (p270). The participants of interviews and survey were asked to rate the importance of ten types of informal learning and describe an experience that had been formative to their learning. 'On-the-job' learning, working alongside those with more experience and 'team-working' were identified as the most important. Interviews provided some insight into what it was about these factors that was important. 'On-the-job' learning included experience or practice and repetition but also learning that came from "complex multi-faceted problems" which "forced them to draw on a range of different principles covered in their initial training" (p274). Several of the participants identified a need for a balance between being supported and "being allowed to try things on your own without 'someone breathing down your neck'" (p281). Working with others was beneficial, not usually in order to copy a particular person but as a means to learn different techniques from a range of individuals. Specific role-models or mentors were seen as less important. Observation was found helpful if it was "purposeful rather than casual" (p272).

The interviews revealed that feedback, reflection and articulation were also important to learning. Articulation is described by Cheetham & Chivers (2001) as "being forced to articulate their work either orally or in writing" which was a "great source of learning" identified by all (p278). Similar to findings from Eraut, confidence was seen as a very important factor. Cheetham & Chivers (2001 p281) state that "the linkage between confidence and competence was.. a recurrent theme throughout the interviews" and negative events had an impact on confidence. They conclude that the research supports there being a link between confidence and learning.

In Chapter 3 I will discuss Webster-Wright's (2009) concept of Authentic Professional Learning (APL) and the influence this had on my research methodology. I include her study here in order to outline the findings of her research into the APL of occupational therapists, physiotherapists and speech pathologists in Australia. Her phenomenological research asked participants to discuss occasions where they had learnt as a professional. Webster-Wright (2010 p113) conceptualised her findings in terms of learning transitions that encompass four interrelated constituents

1. **Understanding** – change in professional understanding
2. **Engagement** – actively engaged in professional practice they care about, perceive as uncertain and see as novel
3. **Interconnection** – through multiple transitions the experiences of professionals are interconnected over time with experiences of others as an iterative, circuitous and imaginative web
4. **Openness** – experienced as a process that is open to possibilities yet circumscribed by the professional's particular working context

Webster-Wright (2010 p115) emphasises a change in professional understanding or awareness as being the central component of APL and this change is facilitated by engagement, interconnection and openness. She conceptualises this change as “embodied” as it changes who the participants were as professionals not simply what they know or can do. To illustrate this she cites comments such as “I’m more confident”; “I become more aware of what I am”. She also emphasises the significance of interconnection by stating that “no participant described learning without reference to interaction with other people” (p139). Similarly to Cheetham & Chivers (2001) it was not the “predetermined process” of mentor or supervisor that was helpful to learning but

the “quality of the relationship” (p155) regardless whether this was with mentor, supervisor or peer.

The research on workplace or informal learning discussed so far is multi-professional. Two studies on social work informal learning indicate that many of the findings in these multi-professional studies are similar to those in social work discipline-specific research. Gola (2009) conducted narrative research with 30 social workers across adults and children’s services in Italy with a focus on how they had learned. Most prevalent was learning from colleagues, learning from practice itself and from reflecting on errors. Avby (2015) conducted ethnographic research with two children and family social work departments in Sweden. Her focus was how social workers learn in their daily practice. She found that learning was “embedded in daily activities” (p95) involving consultation with colleagues, problem framing and building relationships. She links learning in practice with sense-making in practice, commenting on the “scant attention” paid to this in empirical studies (p96). She concludes that the study identified “a variety of learning opportunities in everyday practice that could potentially be used in efforts to organize a more reflective practice to facilitate improved workplace learning” (p95).

## **2.8 Expertise and professional learning: Conclusion**

The development of expertise has been conceptualised as progression toward an intuitive fluidity of practice. This concept has been critiqued for not differentiating between experienced and expert practice, overlooking the context dependant nature of expertise; and, importantly for this thesis, not addressing how expertise is developed.

Evidence about how professionals learn in practice and what enables this learning has relevance to this thesis. There were several recurrent themes across the research despite spanning two decades, originating in different countries and incorporating different professions. These include interacting with others, the challenge of practice and confidence.

- Interacting with others

The importance of the role of others in learning was evident throughout all the research into work place learning and into social work student satisfaction. The studies into professional learning indicate that this gave rise to learning regardless of whether the interaction was with supervisors and mentors or peers and colleagues. The determining factor was the quality of the relationship. Feedback and support were important for learning but so were working with or consulting colleagues. The interactive nature of professional learning parallels the interactive nature of professional judgement as discussed **(2.3.3)** indicating that the role of others is important to both endeavours.

- The challenge of practice

All studies into professional learning highlighted the practice itself as facilitative of learning. This is referred to as tackling challenging or complex tasks (Eraut 2004a; Cheetham & Chivers 2001), on-the-job learning (Cheetham & Chivers 2001), actively engaged in practice (Webster-Wright 2010), learning from practice itself (Gola 2009) and learning that was “embedded in daily activities” (Avby 2015 p95). Much of the discussion on this focuses on the challenge inherent in that work. It was also noted in several of the studies that learning derived from interaction with service users.

- Confidence

Confidence was a prodigious factor recurring throughout the research. Research into professional learning indicated confidence to be the most prevalent influential factor. It was apparent in the research into social workers and professional judgement and was also the one unifying theme in the studies reviewed for my CAS. Confidence is found as both outcome of professional learning (Webster-wright 2010) and facilitative of learning (Eruat 2004a; Cheetham & Chivers 2001). Eraut (2004a) explains that what he refers to as 'confidence' is not the attribute of self-esteem but self-efficacy as conceptualised by Bandura. This is "the conviction that one can successfully execute the behaviour required to produce the outcome" (Bandura 1977 p183). Using Bandura's concept and adapting Holden et al.'s (2002) self-efficacy scale, Parker (2005; 2006) researched the self-efficacy of social work students on placement. He found that there was a significant increase in self-efficacy during the placement. This indicates that throughout the duration of the placement social work students develop a confidence which, as can be seen in the literature of this review, is a necessary factor for professional learning and an important factor for social work professional judgement.

Self-efficacy may be the key factor at the confluence of professional learning and social work professional judgement. I argued when discussing research on social work professional judgement that the research indicates that it takes more than available evidence and decision making mechanisms for social workers to effect professional judgement. It takes more than 'knowing that'. Bandura (1977 p193) states

Outcome and efficacy expectations are differentiated, because individuals can believe that a particular course of action will produce certain outcomes, but if they entertain serious doubts about whether they can perform the necessary activities such information does not influence their behavior

Parker (2006 p1022) paraphrases this by emphasising that it suggests one “may know what actions need to be undertaken” but to “achieve effective completion” requires “an element of belief or confidence” in one’s ability to perform these actions.

In a recent article Bogo et al. (2017) researched the self-efficacy of social work students along with experienced social workers. They found that emotional regulation, acquisition and application of knowledge and relational skills were the factors effecting self-efficacy. Bogo et al. (2017) refers to research by Kruger & Dunning (1999) and others indicating that self-efficacy is not always congruent with actual performance and there is a risk of overconfidence. Carpenter et al. (2015), however report that their self-efficacy research with Newly Qualified Social Workers shows that this overconfidence was rated at base-line, dipped shortly after then increased over the course of the rest of the programme. They suggest that this overconfidence was as a consequence of not yet being aware of the complexities of practice that they would face, hence the dip in self-efficacy soon thereafter. The risk of overconfidence in relation to professional judgement could be a concern but there is a difference between being overly confident about a particular judgement decision and increased self-efficacy that is gained from learning.

## **2.9 Literature Review Conclusion: Framing the research questions**

The research aim for this thesis is to understand how social work students develop the skills required to “be able to practise as an autonomous professional, exercising their own professional judgement” (HCPC 2017 p6) with the intention that this can inform social work education. The two research questions are



- How do social work students develop skills for professional judgement?
- What enables, facilitates and enhances this development?

As discussed, confidence or self-efficacy is found to be important for professional learning. My approach is not to research whether this is the case as the evidence exists for this (Cheetham & Chivers 2001). My focus is to seek to understand the learning processes and factors that give rise to this in order for social work students to develop their skills for professional judgement. Research into the development of skills for professional judgement is extremely limited as is research about how learning takes place on placement. Parker (2006 p1031) states

If we are to move towards a greater understanding of effective learning in practice education, which we should do given the resources it demands, it will be necessary to consider what is involved in or promotes that learning

If we are also going to enhance how social workers navigate the complexity of social work professional judgement we need to understand how the skills for professional judgement are developed and this begins when social workers are students.

# 3 Methodology, methods and data analysis

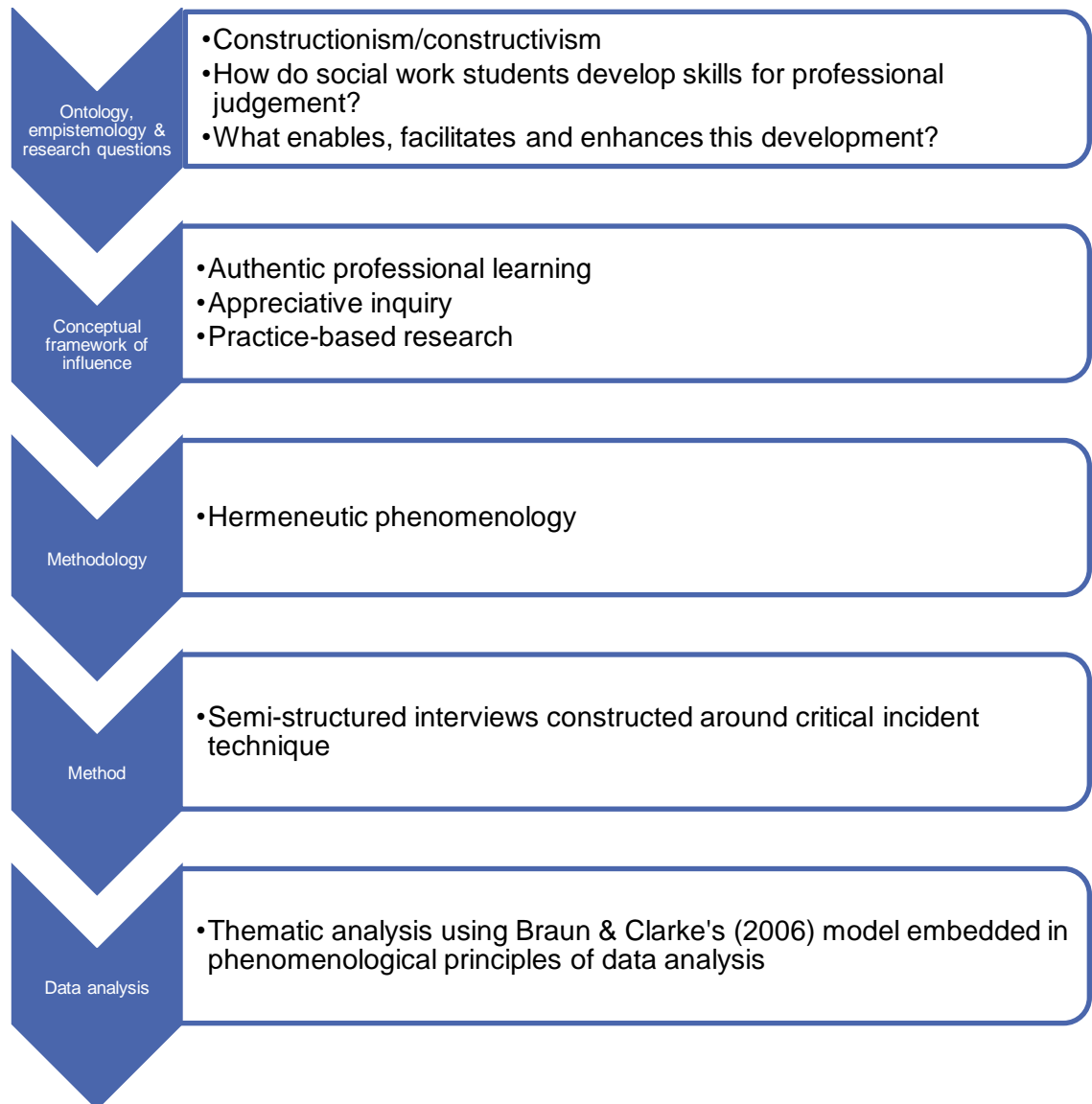
## 3.1 Introduction

My methodological journey was an iterative one. The learning from my exploratory study and my CAS influenced my decisions for the thesis and resulted in me replicating some aspects, such as the incorporation of Critical Incident Technique (CIT). Other methodological choices arose from moments of clarity I had during the process of reading widely alongside reflecting on the intention of the research questions and on my interpretations about knowledge and understanding. The discovery of Webster-Wright's (2009) concept of Authentic Professional Learning (APL), Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider & Srivastva 1987) and the notion of Practice-Based Research (PBR) are examples of ideas that struck a chord with me and propelled the thesis along a more cohesive and purposeful route. I had a similar moment of clarity when I understood that the methodology best suited to my research was phenomenology rather than narrative research, which is what I had initially proposed. Understanding the idea of the development of skills for professional judgement as being a phenomenon, about which research participants could inform me, created a significant shift for me in how I understood the whole thesis. I will explain this later in the chapter.

The most significant learning point from this methodological journey was understanding the way in which decisions flow from one another and influence one another to create a coherent and intentional process so that ontology, methodology, methods and analysis can form a congruent whole. I have presented the journey of this process in a flow-diagram (**3:1**) which I created and used to ensure I remained orientated to the research

purpose. The flow-diagram illustrates that decisions about each step in the process gave rise to the next set of decisions required. I began with a combination of the research questions that I intended to answer and my own approach to ontology and epistemology from which all other decisions needed to flow.

**Figure 3:1** *Flow-diagram of methodological journey*



In this chapter I will first briefly outline the research design in order to provide an overview. I will then discuss how I reached these research design decisions by broadly

following the sequence of the flow-diagram (3:1). Alongside this I will discuss important issues such as researcher reflexivity and ethical issues.

### **3.2 Research design**

The research questions are

- How do social work students develop skills for professional judgement?
- What enables, facilitates and enhances this development?

The questions are intentionally broad. As I will go on to explain, my aim was to discover the essence, in phenomenological terms, of the Authentic Professional Learning (APL) of social work students and as such I did not want to curtail the holism of this by narrowing my research focus.

The participants were 14 social work students who were at the point of qualification. They had completed their MSc Social Work qualification at a university in England within the preceding two months. The research method was individual semi-structured interviews focused around critical incidents of learning that had happened during their practice placements. The intention was for the critical incidents to act as a catalyst for the participants to reflect more broadly about their learning and development in relation to social work professional judgement.

I also met with 7 of the 14 participants for a focus group which took place six months after the interviews. The purpose of this was for me to share with the participants my early interpretations of the data and gain their input in analysing this further. As such I will discuss this as part of the data analysis process rather than the data collection. The

focus group enabled a more collaborative approach by introducing an element of co-construction to the interpretation of the data. The intention throughout was to view the participants as a source of expertise in their own learning and development from which social work education can learn, rather than to test their abilities in decision making.

### **3.3 Construction, interpretation and reflexivity**

In my CAS I described my ontological position to be one of constructivism/constructionism and my epistemological position to be interpretivist. I will summarise this discussion as its arguments were fundamental to the development of my thesis research. Savin-Baden & Major (2013) alert us to the risk of an ontological position statement being merely a "sterile" (p73) statement to justify quality by showing you have "attended" (p75) to these issues. However, far from being an adjunct to the body of my work I consider it as the fulcrum. This is because everything flowed from my understanding that my perspective is located within a subjectivist paradigm. I do not believe there to be a "Real World (big R, big W) out there, independent of our experience of it" (Moses & Knutsen 2012 p8). This is because, as Crotty (1998 p43) states "meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting". The intention is not to diminish the value of research evidence to help understand the world but to always acknowledge that such understanding has been achieved via interpretation and as such should be approached in a critically analytical way. This accounts, in part, for my orientation toward qualitative rather than quantitative research as I am interested in scrutinising the interpretations that are made, in other words, the 'why' and the 'how' rather than solely the 'what'.

I use both the words constructivism and constructionism to describe my ontological position and in my CAS I discussed the variation in the way these two terms are used

in the research methodology literature. Some authors do not differentiate between these terms and use one or the other as a means of delineating this approach from a positivist or naturalistic approach to research (e.g. Moses & Knutsford 2012; Gergen 2010; Philips 1995). Cohen et al. (2011 p17) choose to dispense with the use of either of these terms and "as a matter of convenience" use the "generic" term "Interpretive". Where these terms are distinguished from one another constructivism is considered as the cognitive process of individuals forming their own interpretation. Whereas constructionism is the way "knowledge and the knower" are "embedded within history, context, culture, language and experience"(Savin-Badin & Major 2013 p63). Crudely put, the former can be seen as a psychological construct and the latter sociological. I found Philips' (1995) article useful in this respect. He presents these notions not as separate constructs inviting an either/or approach but as on a continuum. He states "The construction of knowledge is an active process, but the activity concerned can be described in terms of individual cognition or else in terms of social and political processes (or of course in terms of both)" (Philips 1995 p5). My perspective is encapsulated by his final comment "in terms of both". I perceive individual cognition as being impacted by and interpreting the socially constructed world so that they are inextricably linked.

The acknowledgement of this constructivist/constructionist viewpoint means that I view the participants' contributions to be their own individual interpretation but also acknowledge that interpretation to have been influenced by the socio-political and cultural world that they inhabit. Similarly, I perceive my own interpretation of the research to be constructed in this way.

A constructive approach to research requires reflexivity to be at its core in order to be able to understand and disrupt the impact of this social construction. Fook (2012 p196) defines reflexivity as "being able to locate one's influence in context, and to understand

how one's self and actions are constructed in relation to context". Alvesson & Skoldberg (2009 p9) advocate the need for a reflexive cycle in research constituting "interpretation of interpretation" in order to achieve "the utmost awareness" of assumptions. This model of reflexivity as a cycle of interpretation has guided me throughout the research as both a mechanism to search for possible alternative meanings and a scrutiny of myself as the interpreter.

### **3.4 Conceptual framework of influence for the research design**

The framework for my research design derived from a combination of an understanding of my constructivist/constructionist approach together with what would be appropriate to meet the needs of my research questions. Three concepts influenced the way in which I wished to frame the research. These were Authentic Professional Learning (APL) (Webster-Wright 2009); Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider & Srivastva 1987) and Practice-Based Research (PRB) (Epstein 2001; Marsh & Fisher 2005; Driks 2006; McMillen; Dodd & Epstein 2012; Jaynes 2014). I refer to these as a conceptual framework of influence rather than a methodology because it was an integration of the principles of each of these concepts that influenced the design and execution of the research rather than a strict adherence to any specific process inherent in any one of them. I have discussed the integration of these three concepts in a previously published journal article (Rawles 2016).

I will explain each of these concepts in turn and present my argument for their congruence with one another.

### **3.4.1 Authentic Professional learning (APL)**

Webster-Wright is an Australian educational researcher and her 2009 article on APL influenced me greatly. APL is a term she suggests to encapsulate the concept of the holistic “lived experience” of workplace learning for professionals (p715). Her argument is that both the focus of professional development and of research into professional development have emphasised “programs and content rather than learning experiences” (p712). This has also been discussed with regard to social work education (Gitterman 2004; Wehbi 2011).

Webster-Wright’s (2009 p703) review of the research indicates that research into workplace learning often seeks to evaluate discrete, de-contextualised and atomised elements of teaching and learning which “disregards the value of ongoing and situated learning”. This is despite theories of professional learning emphasising the importance of context and situation. Such theories include situated learning (Lave & Wenger 1991); transformational learning (Mezirow 1981) and experiential learning (Dewey 1938; Kolb 1984). As discussed in chapter 2, when research on professional learning is not confined to discrete learning events then the importance of informal learning is highlighted. However, as Eraut (2004a p249) states “informal learning is largely invisible, because much of it is taken for granted and not recognised as learning”.

Webster-Wright argues for a paradigm shift in research so that it “seeks to understand professionals’ experiences of learning in a way that respects and retains the complexity and diversity of these experiences, with the aim of developing insights into better ways to support professionals” (2009 p714). This indicates the need for research that begins with how learning takes place rather than with the mechanisms by which learners are taught. She proposes that this can be achieved by learning from the perspective of the



professionals themselves. Her research, therefore, seeks to understand how professionals have learned in the workplace rather than find out what, or if, they have learned from a specific event, approach or input.

To understand how social work students develop skills for professional judgement, an approach that seeks to uncover their authentic professional learning would seem appropriate. This is particularly so given that there is such a paucity of research in this area.

### ***3.4.2 Appreciative Inquiry (AI)***

To uncover APL means it is necessary to understand what has been effective in terms of learning taking place. Webster-Wright (2009; 2010) in her original research into APL sought to find out instances of when work-based learning had been effective. This leads to the second frame of influence for the thesis research design and that is Appreciative inquiry (AI). AI was originally developed by Cooperrider & Srivastva (1987) as a mechanism for change within organisations. Its focus is on best practice and what works well as opposed to taking a deficit approach to problem solving. It is based on the premise that within any organisation, system or group there are some things that work and this should be used as a driver for future positive development.

Cooperrider & Srivastva's (1987) original model featured the four sequential processes of Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny. Using the principles of AI in my research I focused on what equates to the initial Discovery phase which involves the collection and scrutiny of 'stories' of what works. A study by Michael (2005 p224) into Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) directorships describes the use of this first stage of AI for research purposes as a series of interviews that constitute "mini-versions of the discovery phase of the appreciative framework". She states that, to achieve this,

her questions needed “to be centred on the key element of that phase: appreciating the best of what is within that NGO”. Similarly my research sought to find out and appreciate what is ‘the best’ in enabling students to develop skills for professional judgement.

Jones, Cooper & Ferguson (2008 p1) argue that commentary on social work has been characterised by a “deficit culture” resulting in “a paucity” in accounts of best practice which often remain “hidden from view”. Hiding best practice from view constitutes a lost opportunity to learn from a potentially rich source of evidence from which to develop and enhance social work and social work education. AI has begun to have a presence in social work research and literature with authors acknowledging that in addition to being an effective framework it also provides a useful counterbalance to the culture of deficit reporting (Bellinger & Elliott 2011; Hughes 2012; Teater & Carpenter 2017). Research located for my literature reviews in both the CAS and this thesis identified studies about professional judgement that also used an approach to ascertain what has been positive and what has worked well even though this is not always attributed to a specific AI framework (Davies et al 2011; Keddell 2011, Keddell 2016).

My decision to use AI also derives from reflecting on my exploratory study in which the students I interviewed had undergone a significant period of development in their ability to formulate and express their professional judgement. They were then able to reflect with me as researcher on why and how this positive development had occurred. My previous experience as a social worker, manager and practice educator and my current experience as a social work educator and tutor have also contributed to my awareness of the significant positive development that takes place for many social work students. However, the “deficit culture” (Jones, Cooper & Ferguson 2008 p1) risks leaving little room for either a more public appreciation of this or an opportunity to understand how this positive development comes about.

A criticism of AI can be that a focus on positives is at the expense of confronting problems or negative experiences. This is considered to be a “superficial understanding” (Bellinger and Elliott 2011 p713) because problematic or negative elements are not ignored in AI but are framed in such a way to consider what would make them work. This was evidenced in my research as some participants contrasted different approaches by practice educators across placements. They were then able to reflect upon what it was that made the positive experience effective. It is also worth noting that difficult or negative experiences or mistakes can lead to positive learning experiences (Sicora 2017). In this instance it is the positivity of the learning that is appreciated.

Two key features of appreciative inquiry that also resonate with my research approach are that it takes a constructionist perspective and that it emphasizes collaboration between researcher and research participants.

### ***3.4.3 Practice-based research (PBR)***

Practice-based research, sometimes referred to as ‘practice research’, is a “natural bedfellow” (Rawles 2016 p107) to uncovering authentic professional learning. This is because they both start with an acceptance that we can, and ought to, learn from practice by seeking to understand the authenticity of how things happen in the practice environment. At its simplest, practice-based research is defined by Epstein (2001 p17) as research that aims “to answer questions that emerge from practice in ways that inform practice”. Epstein (2001) proposed the term practice-based research as a counter to the prevalence of what he called research-based practice (RBP). The disadvantage of RBP is seen in the way it is produced outside of practice experience and then applied to practice “in a linear fashion” (Marsh & Fisher 2005 p45). Jaynes'

(2014 p226) states that in RBP "the individual professional is the downstream recipient of scientific knowledge". There are consequences to the eventual applicability of research if it is de-contextualised from the complicating factors of the practice environment. This has parallels with my argument in the literature review in chapter 2 regarding the limitations of research methods when they seek to de-contextualise professional judgement from the environment in which it takes place.

There are different views about what is considered necessary for research to conform to the notion of being practice-based (Saurama & Julkunen 2012; Uggerhoj 2012; Dodd & Epstein 2012). Driks (2006 p276) argues that the fundamental purpose of practice research should be "to seek to give voice to the world of practice as perceived, understood, and struggled with from the inside. In this view, what works is always seen in relationship to what is desired or valued". I have previously put forward an argument (Rawles 2016 p108) that it may be more fruitful for research to be conceptualised as being practice-based by the way in which it can "stand up to scrutiny in terms of its ability to uncover practice as it is experienced by the practitioner" rather than any specificity of research method or participant/researcher configuration. I also proposed that it could be that the premise of practice research is not only that the research problem should emerge from practice (Epstein 2001) but an acceptance that the solution can also emerge from practice. The opportunity for this is enhanced if practice research uses the principles of AI by "appreciating the best" (Michael 2005 p224) within that practice. This is not to deny the possibility of new innovative ways of doing things that are not currently part of the practice lexicon but to value and not overlook the ways in which practitioners currently experience solutions to these practice problems.

### **3.5 Decisions about 'who', 'what' and 'when' of the research design**

The conceptual framework of influence meant that I wanted to research the authentic professional learning of social work students, with regard to professional judgement skills, by appreciating what is best. I wanted to understand this from the way in which it is experienced in practice.

Given this frame, I chose social work students as the most appropriate participants. There are others who could have a valuable contribution to make about this topic. These include educators, in practice and academic institutions, and service users who contribute to the education of social work students and those who receive a service from them. These perspectives are important and would benefit from being the focus of further research, however in order to understand learning as it is experienced and given the paucity of any research in this area, I decided social work students should be the focus.

Another reason for the choice of social work students as participants is that their voice is seldom the focal point of social work education research and their perspectives and experiences are a potentially valuable untapped resource. There is a growing body of literature on 'student voice' in educational research and reform (Cook-Sather 2006) but this rarely appears as a concept in social work research. In social work education, particularly practice learning, we require students to be instrumental in identifying their own learning needs and assessing their progress (Parker 2005) yet in research we rarely move beyond positioning them as subjects to be evaluated. Fielding (2004), an education researcher and academic writing on the student voice in research advocates a dialogic interaction between teacher and student as the most effective way to achieve a transformation in education. My intention throughout has been for the students to be

seen as a source of new knowledge to inform social work education rather than the research being a means by which to test or judge their specific abilities.

Having decided on social work students as research participants I chose placement experiences as the focus of the research. This fulfilled my intention for the research to be practice-based and, although learning about professional judgement also happens elsewhere for students, it is in practice that this professional judgement is enacted. It is therefore from practice that they can draw on their lived experience of social work professional judgement in order to reflect on the effectiveness of their learning. I anticipated, similarly to my experience during the exploratory study, that the participants would also make reference to learning outside of the practice environment in order to reflect on their learning, as indeed was the case. I deliberated over at what stage within the practice learning cycle the participants should be. I decided that the point of qualification would enable them to reflect on the entirety of their learning experience, including both practice placements. It would also be before their transition into qualified practice.

I did not intend to choose a particular field of social work practice as I wanted to obtain a broad perspective across the professional as a whole. Much, though not all, research into decisions-making in social work has a child protection focus yet university based social work education remains generic. The students are likely to have had placements in services working with children and families as well as with adult and I wanted to find out about their learning experiences holistically.

### **3.6 A hermeneutic phenomenological study**

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, I initially conceived of this study as narrative research but changed it to being a phenomenological study. The insight that this change brought about was instrumental to my understanding and framing of the research. As my interest was the experiences of social work students I was initially drawn to narrative research because this foregrounds the stories of individuals. What I came to understand was that my interest lay in the narratives of social work students in so far as these narratives illuminated the development of professional judgement skills (as a phenomenon) rather than interested in the stories of the individuals as an end in themselves. I was influenced in this by the distinction made by Polkinghorne (1995) between 'analysing narratives' and 'narrative analysis'. I wished to analyse the students' narration of their experiences but this did not mean I had to conduct a narrative analysis to do so. Crotty (1996), reviewing phenomenological research in the health field, states that some researchers seek to understand the experiences of individuals by researching phenomena and others seek to understand the phenomena by researching experiences. Not only did this dichotomy exercise my understanding of phenomenology but it also helped to form coherence between ontology, methodology, methods and analysis. My intention was to research experiences in order to understand the phenomena rather than the converse. It is worth noting, that the individual and the phenomena are more usefully understood to influence one another in a hermeneutic circle rather than in a linear fashion. However, my grasp that the phenomenon was my ultimate focal point for this piece of research was helpful to my progress.

Van Manen (2007 p9) states that "phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" and that

phenomenological research "is the explication of phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness". Social work students developing skills for professional judgement could be seen as unique and specific rather than 'everyday'. However, a phenomenological view of understanding the everyday experience is to look at something afresh or with "wonder" (Van Manen 2016 p27). This is achieved by presenting it to consciousness in order to investigate its 'essence'. Social workers are forming and exercising their professional judgement on an ongoing basis, as has been seen in the literature review (chapter 2). The skills required to enable them to do this are developed on an ongoing basis. In this sense it is an 'everyday' occurrence that takes place. What phenomenological research aims to do is to make this everyday occurrence exceptional by 'wondering' about its nature.

Phenomenology should not merely be understood as a research methodology but a philosophy. It was developed by Edward Husserl in the early twentieth century based on an understanding of the world that moved away from the rational Cartesian separation of mind and body to conceive of an individual as being part of the world rather than separate from it (Savin-Baden & Major 2013). The idea of the "lifeworld" (Van Manen 2007 p182) is fundamental to phenomenology and expresses the notion of our "ways-of-being-in-the world" (Van Manen 2007 p183). Van Manen (2007 p182) contrasts this with a scientific approach that "tends to turn us into non-participating spectators, surveyors of the world". The idea of this interaction between the individual and their world is in accord with the constructivist perspective of constructing meaning whilst engaging with the world (Crotty 1998). It also forms the basis of the concepts of APL and PBR. Webster-Wright's (2009; 2010) research into the APL of work-based learners is a phenomenological study.

There are many variations in the way in which phenomenology has been conceptualised beyond the commonality of a search for essences by focusing on lived



experience. One of the key variations has been between a descriptive approach and interpretive approach (Langdridge 2007; Van Manen 2007). Langdridge (2007 p86) distinguishes descriptive phenomenology from interpretive as the former being about “describing phenomena” as opposed to the latter “explaining phenomena”. With reference to my earlier discussion on construction **(3:3)**, descriptive phenomenology focuses primarily on the ‘what’ rather than the ‘how’ or the ‘why’. It is therefore interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology that I found to be an appropriate methodology for my study, particularly the approach of Max van Manen.

Van Manen follows in the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology introduced by Heidegger and developed by Gadamer. However, he places greater emphasis on what he calls the text of the story being a mediator of the experience which requires interpretation in order to understand the essence of human experiences. He discusses the distinction between “the lived now and the mediated now” (Van Manen 2014 p34). He uses an example of recounting an enjoyable occasion of meeting and talking with a friend. The focus of hermeneutic phenomenology would not be on the word or concept of ‘talk’ but “on the *experience*” he had with his friend. In recounting this story of a meeting and a conversation, he is mediating the meaning of the experience he had (Van Manen 2016 p38). In **(3:9:3)** I will discuss the practical implications of this in my use of CIT as I focused on the underlying meanings of the critical incidents rather than on the specifics of the incidents themselves. In this way the critical incidents are the mediators of the experience.

Van Manen (2016 p15) suggests the applicability of phenomenology as a means of inquiring into “the practices of professional practitioners”. He calls this a phenomenology of practice. Whilst he states that there is no prescriptive method of researching a phenomenology of practice, he outlines a methodological structure of 6 activities that form a loose framework (Van Manen 2007 p30/31). He emphasises that

there is likely to be a “dynamic interplay” between these activities. Van Manen’s six numbered statements that make up this structure are presented below. I have added in bullet points below each statement to show how I addressed the activities and referenced where they are discussed in the thesis.

1. Turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world.
  - Rationale for the research and my interest (Chapter 1).
2. Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it.
  - Commitment to practice-based research and use of CIT to ground the research in real life practice (Chapter 3).
3. Reflecting on the essential themes which characterise the phenomenon.
  - Creating a thematic map and presenting three key domains that characterise the phenomenon (Chapter 3 & 4).
4. Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting.
  - Ongoing reflective notes taken and summaries of ideas written throughout the process. Conceptualising the drafting of the thesis as part of the consolidation of ideas rather than merely reporting.
5. Maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon.
  - Keeping a grounded orientation to the purpose of the research throughout (e.g. methodological flow-diagram chapter 3) and providing summaries throughout the thesis to indicate relevance to the question.
6. Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole
  - A continuous movement between parts and whole in data analysis. (Chapter 3). Using statements from the data (part) to illustrate the domains that make up the phenomenon (whole) (Chapter 4)

### ***3.6.1 Potentially problematic concepts in phenomenology***

Some of the concepts in phenomenology can be misunderstood or seen to potentially contradict a constructivist approach to research. These are the concept of 'essence', the pre-reflective and bracketing-out. I will explain these concepts in the context of my study.

To seek the essence of something is fundamental to phenomenology. This can have positivistic overtones and imply a search for the irrefutable, consistent core of something. What essence is in phenomenology is a characteristic of something or a "lived quality" (Van Manen 2007 p10). Van Manen (2016 p 52) describes essence as "the thingness of things as it acquires its meaning in relation to the other things that surround each other in the world". The domains presented in my findings (chapter 4) are my interpretation of the essences or characteristics of the development of skills for professional judgement for this group of participants. I cannot generalise this to be the irrefutable essence for all social work students in all circumstances.

In Husserl's original presentation of phenomenology he contended that inquiry should seek to describe experience as it is lived pre-reflectively and that the researcher should 'bracket out' his or her own perspective so that it does not hinder the identification of the essence of the phenomenon. Hermeneutic phenomenology refutes the notion of the researcher standing outside the cycle of interpretation (Savin-Baden & Major 2013). There is, however, an acceptance that the researcher needs to take a reflexive stance toward his or her interpretation as is advocated for all qualitative research (Alvesson & Skoldberg 2009). Van Manen believes the notion of the pre-reflective to be somewhat spurious as once you have brought something to consciousness you are already reflecting upon it and it becomes the "mediated now" rather than the "lived now" (Van Manen 2016 p34). This should not be considered as a weakness because, as Van

Manen discusses, it is through reflection on the phenomenon that an understanding of its essence is brought to consciousness (Van Manen 2007; 2016).

### **3.7 Sampling and recruitment**

As can be seen in the methodological flow-diagram (**Fig 3:1**) my decision to carry out a hermeneutic phenomenological study led me to a data collection method of semi-structured interviews constructed around CIT. Before discussing this in depth I will outline my decisions regarding the participants in order to provide a foundation upon which to understand the operational aspects of the data collection methods when discussed in (**3:9**).

Purposive sampling was required in terms of the participant target group because, as Creswell (2007 p125) states, the participants need to be able to “inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon of the study”. As I wanted students to be able to reflect upon the entirety of their qualifying social work education I needed to choose participants from a cohort of students who were completing their course at the time of data collection. Therefore all participants came from a cohort of 40 MSc Social Work students at the university within which I worked. I will discuss later the ethical issues arising from this (**3:12**).

The research was explained to the entire cohort at the end of their course. Once they had completed the qualification all were sent an email with an information sheet and consent form and asked to contact me if they wished to participate or find out anything more about the research. It had been agreed that between 8 and 15 participants would be viable number. As this was a qualitative study for professional Doctorate research any more than 15 may have generated too much data to manage effectively as the

intention was to understand the richness and depth of the data rather than to skim the breadth of a large number of participants. Fewer than 8 was considered too limiting.

Once the cohort was chosen the sampling of the individual participants was 'convenience' rather than 'purposive'. I intended to accept the offer of participation from the first 15 students who contacted me. If there were more than 15 I would decline their offer but contact them if any dropped out. This was not necessary because 14 students volunteered to participate.

### **3.8 The participants**

I have chosen not to present demographic information in a way that it is attributable to individual participants but instead use "crude report categories" (Cohen et al. 2011 p92 with reference to Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias 1992). This was for two reasons. Firstly, the study is a small qualitative study and therefore cannot be considered as representative or suitable as a comparative sample. I did not want to tempt any inappropriate comparisons and wanted to avoid the potential for stereotyped conclusions drawn on the basis of these demographics. Secondly the recording of demographics such as ethnicity, where numbers are small, runs the risk of a breach of confidentiality as others, particularly students from the same cohort, may be able to identify the student(s) in question. Differences in ethnicity, gender, disability, age and experience are likely to have an impact on learning and would be a very useful focus of future research but I was clear from the outset that this would not form a part of this research unless these were factors that the participants brought into the interviews themselves.

There is however value in terms of research credibility and potential for generalisability to comment on the extent the participant group as a whole reflected the cohort and the wider social work student population in England. Demographic characteristics of the participant group are set out in table 3:1.

**Table 3:1 Demographic characteristics of the participants**

<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>BAME*</b>	<b>White British</b>	<b>Age</b>
10	4	7	7	late 20s – late 30s

\* including Black African, Black Caribbean, Black British, South Asian and mixed heritage

- Gender – There were 10 men in a cohort of 40 students. The percentage of males enrolled on social work courses in England in 2014/15 (the most recent year figures are available) was 13.6% (Skills for Care 2016). Therefore whilst the participant group is broadly reflective of their own cohort, there were a greater proportion of men in the participant group than is the case in England as a whole.
- Ethnicity - There was a 50% ratio of BAME to White British students in the participant group which is slightly fewer BAME students than the cohort, which was approximately 60%, but much higher than the figure for England which in 2014/15 was 30.3% BAME (Skills for Care 2016).
- Age – in England the age band of 24 – 39 constituted 45% of all social work students who enrolled in 2014/15 (Skills for Care 2016). All the participants fell within this age band but it is worth noting that the figures for England include undergraduate and postgraduate students. If postgraduate students were calculated separately it is likely that the majority would fall within the age band of the research participant group.

Whilst there are differences between the participant group and England as a whole, most notably in terms of ethnicity and to a lesser extent in terms of gender, they were broadly reflective of their own cohort.

All students coming on to the course are required to have at least six months experience working in social care. Most have more than this and many have several years of experience. The pre-course work experience of the participants varied from just less than a year to approximately 10 years. In 2014/15, 31.8% of students enrolled on postgraduate compared with 68.2% on undergraduate social work courses in England (Skills for Care 2016). As such the participants in this study are likely to be older, more experienced and significantly more likely to hold a first degree than the majority of social work students on courses in England. However their age and experience is typical of postgraduate social work students.

The participants will be referred to by letter from **A** to **N**. As discussed (**3:6**) the purpose of the study is to research individual experiences in order to understand a phenomenon not vice versa (Crotty 1996). As such I will not be presenting the individual learning stories of the participants. I have therefore not ascribed each a name because the intention is not to track their individual learning journeys through the presentation of data but to interpret the findings thematically across the data set. The ascribing of a letter is merely to avoid confusion when more than one participant is being referred to at any one time.

### **3.9 Data collection**

As can be seen in the flow-diagram (**Fig 3:1**) the data collection method I chose was semi-structured interviews constructed around CIT. I interviewed all the participants

within two months of them completing their social work qualification. The duration of each interview was between 49 minutes and 1 hour and 33 minutes.

I had included my definition of professional judgement in the information sheet sent to participants (**Appendix 4**). In an email confirming arrangements for each interview I drew their attention to this definition and included the following statement

The interview will be based on your critical events of learning so I will be asking you to think about events or incidents that happened in either of your practice placements that, for you, were significant in the development of your professional judgement skills. You can interpret 'event' or 'incident' as broadly as you like and as minor or major as you like. We can then broaden out the discussion from there.

I did not require the participants to complete any pre-interview activity but said that if they wanted to 'have a think' about this beforehand they could do. In my exploratory study participants said they would have found this opportunity advantageous. Whilst I did not want to put any pressure on the participants to complete work beforehand I did want to foster a sense of inclusiveness and allay any anxiety of the unknown by sharing with the participants what the interview would entail.

At the beginning of each interview I provided the participants with a written copy of the definition of professional judgement. I then carried out the interview following the steps set out in the interview guide (**Appendix 5**). Before discussing how this worked in practice (**3:9:3**) I will explain why I chose CIT and my interpretation of the CIT method.

### ***3.9.1 Why Critical Incident Technique (CIT)?***

I chose semi-structured interviews based on CIT as a method due to its congruence with decisions I had made throughout my methodological journey. APL calls for an understanding of learning as it has been experienced. AI requires the collection of stories about what has worked. The ethos of PBR is that it derives its focus from



issues arising from practice. These all indicate the need for a method whereby data is anchored in real examples of practice rather than abstract conceptualisations or theorising about practice (Fook 2002). Similarly it is suited to phenomenology with its focus on lived experience.

The use of CIT is an established research method in studies that have a practice focus similar to my own. Examples of this include research into professional expertise in both social work (Fook et al. 1997) and in nursing (Benner 2001) as well as research into decision making in social work (Keddell 2011; Davies et al. 2011). Webster-Wright (2010 p88), whilst not naming CIT as her method to undertake phenomenological research into APL, asked participants to share “concrete work situations, where participants considered they had learnt as a professional”. Thus similarly to my research she combines phenomenology, critical incident and the ethos of appreciative inquiry in order to understand learning in practice.

An alternative method might have been to undertake an ethnographical study and include observation, similar to those discussed in the literature review (Helm 2016; Stanley 2013; Saltiel 2016). I discounted this because I wanted the participants to reflect on their experiences over the whole duration of their course in order to research their authentic professional learning. Observations would locate the study at specific occasions chosen by me. In addition observations would foreground my interpretation of what I was seeing taking place in terms of their learning rather than how it is “perceived, understood and struggled with from the inside” (Driks 2006 p276) which, as discussed in **(3:4:3)** I consider to be fundamental to practice-based research.

Another option could have been Action Research which would have enabled greater emphasis on partnership and collaboration with the students. I discounted this due to the limited time and scope of the Professional Doctorate to be able to do justice to a

project in order for it to be genuinely co-constructed. I believe there would be value in future research using an Appreciative Inquiry model to facilitate action research with students as well as with other stakeholders such as practice educators and service users.

### ***3.9.2 What is Critical Incident Technique (CIT)?***

CIT was originally developed by Flanagan as a means to analyse the practice and decision making of Second World War airline pilots (Flanagan 1954). Flanagan described CIT as “a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behaviour in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles” (1954 p327). The inclusion of the phrase “direct observations” in this frequently cited definition has caused some to question the efficacy of the flexible way in which CIT is now being used, including the emphasis away from direct observation toward retrospective self-report (Byrne 2001; Bradbury-Jones & Tranter 2008). Bradbury-Jones & Tranter (2008) question the impact this flexible interpretation has on research rigour. Their concern with regard to retrospective self-report is the potential for inaccuracy of the details of critical incidents. They state that “vague reports suggest that the incident is not well-remembered and some of the data may be incorrect” (2008 p.402). They advocate a closer adherence to Flanagan’s original research methodology and concur with the approach of others (Dachelet et al. 1981; Kemppainen 2000) who choose to discount critical incidents from data analysis if they are considered to be “vague” or incomplete. It is firstly worth noting that despite his reference to “direct observations” (1954 p327) Flanagan did accept retrospective self-reports as a legitimate mechanism for CIT. This is evidenced by his inclusion of several research studies based on self-report in an article outlining the successful use of CIT in the preceding ten years (Flanagan 1954).

This critique in relation to the efficacy of self-report, due to potential inaccuracy, is not one I share and neither do others writing on the subject of CIT (Norman et al 1992; Keatinge 2002; Fook 2002; Butterfield et al. 2005). This divergence of opinion may be rooted in an interpretational difference in the purpose of CIT and the weight given to the specific events of the critical incident as a unit of data. A question to be considered is whether the CIT is being used to collect a number of incidents that accurately represent events as they happen in practice or whether its purpose is as a mechanism to understand the significance of these events to those experiencing them. On reviewing research using CIT it is evident that it is used for both these purposes. This has parallels with the difference between descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenology as discussed previously **(3:6)** and creates a choice for the researcher. As stated by Chell (1998 p51), it is “critically important that the researcher...considers very carefully the nature of the research problem to be investigated, and thinks through how the technique may most appropriately be applied in the particular researchable case”. Thus CIT is framed as a flexible technique rather than an immutable research methodology and should be approached pragmatically (Butterfield et al. 2005).

My approach to CIT was as a device within the method of semi-structured interviews. The locus of my inquiry was not focused on the accurately remembered detail of incidents but on the participants’ reflection on and interpretation of their learning and development with regard to professional judgement. CIT is therefore a device to help the participants and myself access and reflect upon this learning and development as it had been experienced in a practice context. The critical incident becomes, to use Van Manen’s (2016) term, the mediator of the experience. Used in this way its function is akin to Critical Incident as a framework for reflection in learning (Johns 1995; Tripp 2002; Lister & Crisp 2007) which is a familiar tool used in professional education.

My interpretivist approach towards CIT is congruent with my constructivist ontological perspective. It is also reflective of a contemporary approach to qualitative research (Butterfield 2005) which accepts that participants' contributions cannot be considered as representative or necessarily replicable. There is acknowledgment that a person's narrative of past events is a "selective reconstruction" (Riessman 1993 P64). My intention of using CIT, therefore, is not in order that the precise details of critical incidents can be exactly replicated by future social work students. The purpose is to understand the learning that was derived from these incidents and what it was about these occurrences, their essence in phenomenological terms, which enabled that learning so that learning can be better supported in the future. Kedell's (2012 p148) interpretation of CIT concurs with my own. She states

"My focus is on constructed realities and meaning rather than a need for absolute 'truth', many details were not of a great significance in the interview process, as I was most interested in their underlying reasoning...which was not so much a matter of recall as explanation"

### ***3.9.3 The process of using Critical Incident Technique (CIT)***

My experience of using CIT in data collection was similar to that described by Norman et al (1992) in their study on nursing care. They concluded that the critical incidents shared by the participants were "often not clearly demarcated" (p595) which they explain in the following way.

"It became clear that on many occasions the respondents were not talking about one incident, even though they might initially have appeared to be doing so. They were, in fact, summarizing their overall experience within their description of one incident. At the same time it was possible to establish that the incidents were valid – in that the respondents appeared to recount what actually happened as they saw it, and what they said was clearly important to them." (Norman et al. 1992 p595)

Norman et al. (1992) go on to further emphasise the idea of the critical incident being accepted as valid due to its importance to the participant. Similarly to Kedell (2012), the focus of Norman et al.'s study was the meanings the participants derived from the incidents rather than the accuracy of the incidents themselves.

In my exploratory study, which was my first use of CIT, I was initially concerned after the first few interviews that I sometimes struggled to identify demarcated incidents and to recognise their relevance to either professional judgement or learning. By reflecting on this I was able to understand that the problematic issue was with my own expectation of what I would hear. I needed to accept that whatever the participant chose to narrate was in some way significant to their development of professional judgement skills and as such I became open to focusing on their own lived experience rather than my expectation of it. This learning served me well during the data collection and data analysis for the thesis because, similar to my exploratory study, the interviews for this research contained incidents that were not always well demarcated. This could be seen as my own critical incident of learning on my journey through my Professional Doctorate

Similarly to the way in which Norman et al. (1992) states above, some participants used the narration of one incident to summarise a more general experience. An example of this is Participant **A** talking about presenting a case at a multi-disciplinary team meeting. He described one example of this but it was evident this learning had evolved from a cumulative experience of such meetings.

A feature that was also prevalent throughout the interviews was what I have chosen to call 'linked critical incidents'. This was the way in which the participants described a series of occurrences that derived their meaning from their connection to one another.

An example of this is participant **E** being present when a woman was informed that her baby would be removed at birth, then a walk she took to reflect on her reaction to this, then a conversation with a manager as part of supervision a week later. This was narrated as three distinct things that happened but it was in their connection that this became meaningful or critical to the participant. One option would be to view the first event as the critical incident or to categorise all three as separate critical incidents. My decision however is to categorise this as 'linked critical incidents' because each one in its relation to the other is what made this episode significant to her developing skills for professional judgement. I would argue that learning was rarely derived from one incident alone but usually a series of 'linked critical incidents'. A limitation of CIT I would suggest is its potential to overestimate the significance of one isolated incident or example of practice. This risks a distorted impression of lived experience, particularly in relation to researching learning or expertise development and has the potential to detract from the holism of authentic professional learning.

### **3.10 Ethical research**

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Sussex Research Ethics Committee (REC) in 2014. Approval was also given by the REC of the university where the participants had studied. No issues or concerns were raised by either of these committees. I will briefly outline how some of the key elements of this operated in practice

#### **3.10.1 Consent**

Participants were asked to sign a consent form at the beginning of each interview (**Appendix 6**) and the focus group (**Appendix 7**). They had all previously been

provided with a copy to read together with the information sheet. The form included consent for the interview and focus group to be audio taped. I emphasised to the participants that they could withdraw from the study at any point before, during or after the interview and that if they consented to the interview they did not have to also consent to the focus group. I offered to send participants a copy of the transcript of the interview so that they had a further option to withdraw entirely from the study or withdraw certain parts of their discussion as well as provide clarification on statements made if they wished. No participants requested this.

### ***3.10.2 Anonymity and confidentiality***

In research that involves interviews or focus groups total anonymity cannot be guaranteed. Cohen et al. (2011 p91) state “at most the interviewer can promise confidentiality”. The participants were known to me. Those who agreed to participate in the focus group were also known to one another but were requested not to share this information with anyone outside the group and any interview content I shared in the group was anonymised. There is always a possibility that some presentation of qualitative data could enable the participant to be identified by someone who is known to them. The aim however, is to minimise the chances of this as much as possible.

I used a number of measures to achieve this. I kept all data safely stored and password protected. I removed identifying information from the data and randomly assigned each participant a letter from **A-N**. As discussed **(3:8)** I presented demographic information in “crude report categories” (Cohen et al. 2011 p92 with reference to Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias 1992) rather than attribute it to individuals. I also chose not to attribute type of placement setting to individuals in a list or table form to minimise the ease with which information about individuals can be accumulated and cross-referenced. Some researchers suggest the option of creating

“composite” (Savin-Baden & Major 2013 p334) individuals based on “microaggregation” of characteristics (Cohen et al. 2011 p92 with reference to Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias 1992). I did not want to do this as I considered it not to be in the spirit of authenticity that was guiding my research.

The information sheet stated that confidentiality would not be guaranteed if anything was shared that constituted a serious risk to service users or students and, if the need arose, I would discuss with the participant how this should be addressed and why. There was no such occurrence. The participants themselves appeared alert to confidentiality issues and did not share the names of service users during the interviews with some checking themselves when almost lapsing into doing so.

On one occasion a participant sought clarification about confidentiality before he discussed an incident that had involved another student. I reassured him that names would not be used, told him that he should only share what he felt comfortable to do so, said that I would only refer specifically to this incident if I felt able to ensure confidentiality and reminded him that he could see the transcript of the interview. The participant felt re-assured and shared the information.

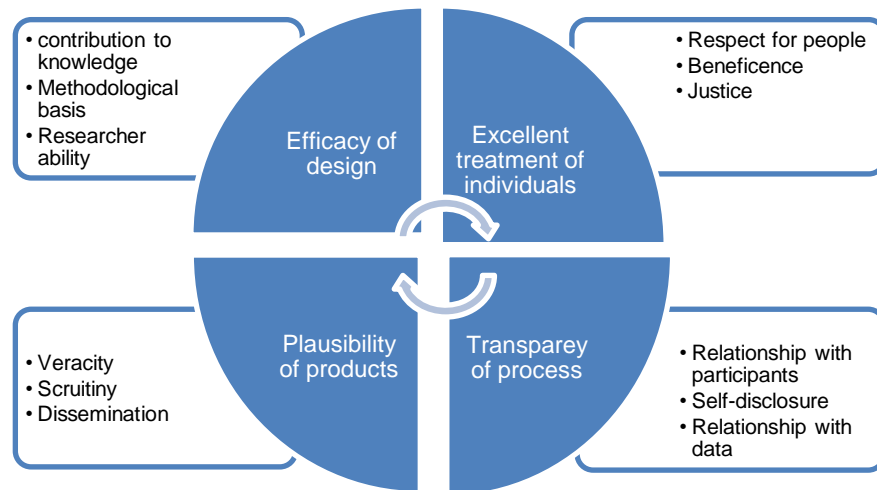
### **3.11 An holistic ethical approach**

Important though the ethical approval process is, as it concentrates our focus on specific areas (Guillemin & Gillam 2004), ethical research goes beyond “procedural ethics” (Guillemin & Gillam 2004 p263). The authors here are referring to what they call “ethics in practice” (p263), how the researcher manages ethical situations as they arise during the course of research. However, ethics for the researcher should go further beyond this and act as a lens through which the whole project is framed. Savin-



Baden & Major (2013) suggest a framework that offers up all research components for ethical consideration, from research design through to dissemination (**Fig 3:2**).

*Figure 3:2 Framework for ethical research Savin-Baden & Major (2013 p332)*



This framework provided me with a means to reflect on the efficacy of my project and understand how an ethical approach needs to be sewn into the fabric of research. The contribution to knowledge, for example, needs to have the potential to advance something worthwhile. My aim is that the ultimate beneficiaries of my research are the people whose lives are impacted by social workers. This requires attention to how the research is designed, valuing the contribution of rarely heard voices (students) and how this new knowledge is disseminated for it to achieve maximum impact. Savin-Baden & Major's (2013) attention to the "excellent treatment of individuals" could be interpreted as moving beyond respecting participants to respecting the student voice as a whole and respecting the worth and rights of service users to receive an optimum service.

### 3.12 Insider research

I was an 'insider' in relation to this research. I was known to the participants as their former lecturer and was conducting research within my own workplace. My role as a social work educator also meant I was an insider with regard to the field and had pre-existing views and opinions. This had implications to which I had to be alert. Firstly, due to the power differential between us the students might feel pressured into participating, be reluctant to make negative comments or contradict what they might perceive to be my view. Secondly conducting research in one's own agency as a practitioner-researcher may have micro-political ramifications (Dunne et al. 2005). Criticism could have been levied at the course or institution which would need to be negotiated. This did not occur. Finally without sufficient reflexive scrutiny I may not have been able to understand how my own pre-existing views could impact my data analysis. There are researchers who advocate keeping ones values held in check (Loxley and Seery 2008) in order to prevent them influencing findings. This resonates with the concept of 'bracketing out' in phenomenology as discussed (3:6). Within a subjectivist paradigm, however, striving for researcher neutrality is misplaced. As Drake (2010 p86) states this is "not desirable and is always unachievable". Subjectivity should be accepted and acknowledged (Smyth & Holian 2008). Subjectivity can be prevented from turning into bias via reflexivity and a continued orientation toward an ethical framework (Groundwater & Mockler 2007; Savin-Baden & Major 2013) such as that outlined (Fig3:2).

There were some practical solutions that I employed to limit the negative impact of being an insider researcher. I ensured that interviews took place after all students work had been marked and returned and they knew they had passed. I hoped this would minimise any sense of obligation for the students to participate and allowed

them freedom to express the views without perceived consequence. I emphasised the changed relationship between us and my role as researcher not lecturer. I stated this on the information sheet (**Appendix 4**) and reiterated in my email correspondence. I also made it explicit that I was seeing them as valuable contributors to knowledge about social work education and that my purpose was not to assess their abilities.

Knowledge of the subject and familiarity with the participants can also have a positive effect. As Mercer (2007 p1) states, insider research is “a double edged sword”. Shared knowledge between the participants and myself enabled us to use ‘short cuts’, such as knowing the structure and expectations of placements, so that we could move more swiftly to a deeper level of discussion. The familiarity between us enabled a sense of ease during the interview. Having known me for the preceding two years I sensed that they respected my integrity and genuine enthusiasm for seeking their input. Several also mentioned that they valued this opportunity as a space to reflect on their learning before job interviews or starting work.

### **3.13 Data analysis**

Silverman (2005 p150) states that for qualitative research “unless you are analysing data more or less from day one you will always have to play ‘catch up’”. This indicates an iterative and highly active process. Positioning myself within a constructivist paradigm I view it not so much as a choice whether to begin analysis from day one but that interpretation and meaning-making inevitably happens throughout. There is a rejection from some of the concept of themes ‘emerging’ from the data (Braun & Clarke 2006; Savin-Baden & Major 2013) because this suggests that themes reside within the data which implies a passivity that denies the highly active and influential role of the researcher in this process. Choices made with regard to data analysis have significant

impact on the research project as a whole and therefore need to be rendered explicit. Whilst acknowledging that analysis and interpretation do take place throughout, there still needs to be a rigorous and demonstrable means of ensuring tangible links between the data and the interpretation of data in order to find “a path through the thicket of prose” Bryman (2004 p399).

As can be seen from the methodology flow-diagram (**Fig 3:1** ) I chose to analyse the data thematically using the process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) whilst adhering to Van Manen’s (2007) methodological principles of hermeneutic phenomenological as discussed (**3:6**). I used NVivo10 to code the data. My choice of thematic analysis was based on the need to identify themes across the data set in order to understand the characteristics or essence of the participants’ development of skills for professional judgement. I chose not to use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) due to its focus on the idiographic, the analysis of a single case at a time and its emphasis on ‘bracketing out’ (Langdridge 2007).

Braun and Clarke ( 2006 p86/87) provide a six stage “recursive” procedure for thematic analysis (**Table 3:6**) I will use each of these stages to explain the process I undertook. In (**Appendices 8-12**) I have provided several tables showing examples of the relationship between chunks of data, codes, themes and the final three domains that formed my conceptual analysis.

**Table 3:2** *Phases of thematic analysis Braun & Clarke (2006 p87)*

1	Familiarizing yourself with your data	Transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas
2	Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code
3	Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
4	Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis
5	Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme
6	Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis, Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis

### 1. Familiarising myself with the data

All interviews were verbatim transcribed. Braun & Clarke suggest reading the entire data set before formal coding begins. I chose to do this in a systematic way focusing on each interview in its entirety before taking an overview across the data set in order to ensure I had immersed myself in the data and to ensure I was effectively incorporating the “parts and the whole” (Van Manen 2007 p31). I undertook the following sequence of steps:

- Noted initial ideas after each interview
- Read the transcript
- Noted issues of key importance for the participant
- Listened to the recording of interview

- Noted issues of key importance for the participant
- Reviewed all three written notes and wrote a brief summary of my initial interpretation of the essence of her/his Authentic Professional Learning in relation to developing skills for professional judgement.

I followed this process for all interviews. It proved very useful listening to the recording as well as reading the transcript because the participants' intended emphasis became more apparent.

## 2. Generating initial codes

Braun & Clarke (2006 p87) state "coding continues to be developed and defined throughout the entire analysis" and this was my experience. Each transcript was returned to, read in detail and chunks of data were coded to a long list of 'nodes' that I created in Nvivo10. An initial list of nodes was created from the summaries written whilst immersing myself in the data then further nodes were created during the coding process. On encountering a segment of data that was relevant to the research questions I would either code it to an existing node or create a new node. I amended and re-labelled nodes as I progressed through the coding. An example of this was realising that there were two elements to the node 'supporting autonomy', one was an 'active facilitation of autonomy', the other was 'valuing student opinions'. I therefore created these two 'child' nodes from the 'parent' node of 'supporting autonomy'. As I amended the nodes I returned to earlier transcripts to review the coding as necessary. As can be seen from the examples (**Appendices 8-12**) I often chose to code large chunks of data across to several nodes in order to retain a sense of the meaning of what was being said, which is conducive to hermeneutic phenomenology, rather than focus on the "semantic content" (Braun & Clarke 2006 p84).

## 3. Searching for themes

Once I had finished coding, I consolidated the codes into themes. These can be seen in the circles on the thematic map (**Appendix 13**). Whilst, in qualitative research,

themes are not dependant on the number of data occurrences it was useful to be able to use Nvivo10 to review prevalence across the data set. References to certain things were mentioned by all participants and this provided a starting point to identify themes and begin to consider what might characterise the development of skills for professional judgement as a phenomenon.

#### 4. Reviewing the themes

The thematic map enabled me to move the different themes around to understand their relationship to one another. Generating themes from coded data can risk a fragmentation of the holism of professional learning. In chapter 4 I emphasise the importance of the way these themes interacted with one another to contribute to the students' learning. Using a thematic map helped me understand one in relation to the other and to see the bigger picture of the research as a whole. To review the validity of the themes it was useful to re-visit sections of the data and the initial summaries I had written about each interview. The tables in **(Appendices 8-12)** demonstrate how the domains (discussed below), can be traced back through the themes, the codes and to the data itself. This mechanism enabled me to check that my interpretation of what characterises the development of skills for professional judgement had its basis firmly within the data collected.

During the phase of reviewing the themes I invited the participants to meet as a group to further review the themes, 7 participants attended. I shared tentative themes and ideas and presented some example extracts of anonymised data. It generated a discussion in which the participants substantiated some themes by further examples or explanations and others themes were developed. I will discuss this along with the data findings in Chapter 4. A particularly useful contribution was the highlighting of differing views. In discussing knowledge, some showed a preference for researching knowledge

before practice and others for seeking out relevant knowledge once they are involved in the practice situation. One participant paraphrased this for his colleagues as “do you prefer to read the manual before you jump in the trench or take the manual into the trench with you to read?” There is a risk that thematic analysis showcases the commonality rather than the difference and this enabled me to be alert to such occurrences.

### 5. Defining and naming themes

From the themes I developed a conceptual framework of three domains that characterise the effective development of skills for professional judgement for these participants. The domains are ‘professional responsibility’, ‘facilitation of the professional voice’ and ‘learner agency’. These can be seen on the rectangles in the thematic map (**Appendix 13**). An important consideration was to understand the domains as interactive to one another. I illustrated this by the inclusion of dual-directional arrows. I honed my interpretation of the domains by writing a paragraph defining each which was then adapted for use in the thesis (Chapter 4). Several of the themes could equally relate to more than one of the domains and I continued to refine and name the themes up to the point of writing the thesis.

### 6. Producing the report

Van Manen emphasises that writing should be approached not merely as a “reporting process” or “just a supplementary activity” (2014 p364), but is integral to the phenomenological project. This is because the research is given meaning by the creative, reflective interpretation of writing and so forms part of the phenomenological inquiry and as such the writer’s voice should be prominent (Savin-Baden & Major 2013). In ensuring a strong creative voice however, the challenge is to ensure that the voices of the participants are not subsumed by my voice as a writer. I have sought to manage this by ensuring that illustrative direct quotations from participants are included



and that there is an explicit relationship between these quotations and my interpretive discussion.

### **3.14 Conclusion**

My methodological journey is illustrated in the flow-diagram (**Fig 3:1**). I began with a constructivist/constructionist and interpretivist perspective through which I wanted to understand how social work students develop skills for professional judgement. Conceptual influences led me to want to discover what works in terms of the authentic professional learning of students and to understand this from a practice-based perspective. This led to a decision that Van Manen's version of hermeneutic phenomenology would be the most appropriate methodology for the research study focusing, as it does, on interpreting data in order to understand the characteristics or essence of the phenomena. The conceptual framework of influence and the methodological choice led me to choose CIT within semi-structured interviews as the method to collect data.

I found the methodological and methods choices I made to be highly effective in realising both the practicalities of the research as well as being able to incorporate principles and values that were an important guide to the research. There are potential limitations with the use of CIT, particularly in terms of its over-emphasis on individual events which can detract from understanding the holism of learning. This was mitigated by identifying the importance of 'linked critical incident' and by conceptualising critical incidents as mediators of experiences rather than as an end in themselves.

A process of thematic analysis enabled me to generate themes that in turn helped me identify three domains that characterise the authentic professional learning of the students in relation to their development of skills for professional judgement. In the next chapter I will use these domains as a framework to present and discuss the research findings and to consider these findings in relation to the literature identified in chapter 2.

# 4 Findings and Discussion

## 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will present my research findings and discuss them in the context of the literature presented in Chapter 2. I will begin by discussing how the participants experienced professional judgement during their practice placements (4:2). I will then move on to answer the research questions more directly by exploring how the participants developed skills for professional judgement and how this development was enhanced (4:3).

## 4.2 Experiences of professional judgement

Participants' experience of professional judgement can be illustrated by looking at the nature of the critical incidents they chose to share. As explained in Chapter 3, my intention was not to collect a number of incidents and use these as units of data. The critical incident was simply the mediator (Van Manen 2016) of the experience. As I also explained, critical incidents were not always well demarcated and often comprised of several 'linked critical incidents'. I have therefore chosen not to list the individual critical incidents but to group the types of experiences to which the critical incidents relate into four loosely defined categories. These indicate the range of ways in which the students experienced professional judgement on placement:

- Assessment and recommendation
- Unexpected events
- Decisions about approaches
- Non-participatory

I refer to these categories as being loosely defined categories as there are variations of types of incident within each category and there is overlap across the categories.

#### **4.2.1 Assessment and recommendation**

In sharing their experience of professional judgement, participants discussed assessments of different types. These included assessments of risk, need and eligibility across a range of social work settings. These were presented, in all cases, as a journey rather than a single decision point. Some individual assessments were presented as a key feature of the placement learning experience. **C**, for example, discussed her assessment of whether to recommend a young person live with her mother or father as an in-depth piece of work lasting most of her placement from which she learned a great deal. **A** shared an assessment of the risk of suicide and the recommendation he had made which he had to then present to the multi-disciplinary team. His journey of reaching his recommendation was lengthy. He discussed this in the interview and concluded by presenting the combination of factors that made him reach his judgement:

**A)** So that decision that I came to... was based on a diagnosis of the person, of borderline personality disorder, was based on her telling me that she would never come to any staff if she was feeling low, and also the unpredictability of her lower moods. So it's kind of three things there, were making me think, actually, we need to keep observations as high as possible.

Other participants grouped together assessments of the same type and discussed them collectively as a learning experience. **M** referred to the assessments of need he undertook in a disabled children's team as if they were a collective entity. **F** discussed undertaking assessments under section 20 of the Children Act 1989. She presents this in a concise way incorporating the whole journey of formulating, arriving at, presenting and justifying the professional judgement:

**F)** A particular key area was around the 16 to 17 Southwark Judgment area where a young person would present as homeless and I would have to then do an initial assessment or a core assessment and make a recommendation within ten days based on my interview with the young person and with the parent as to whether or not the young person falls under Section 20 of the Children Act as in where the parent is prevented from caring for the child and that ultimately I would then have to present that assessment to my manager

As discussed **(3:9:2)** Norman et al. (1992) point out that single critical incidents were often used as a proxy for a more generalised experience. Conversely these examples indicate a group of experiences brought together and presented to illustrate one type of learning experience. This demonstrates the potential limitations of CIT if too rigid an approach is taken in respect of the definition of critical incident.

Other experiences can be characterised as ‘assessment and recommendation’ in a broader sense. These also featured a journey to reach a professional opinion and the communication of this to either the team manager, practice educator or other professionals. They did not necessarily culminate in a formal written presentation of assessment and were not obviously part of a statutory process and often happened in third sector organisations. The following are some examples from third sector placements:

- **D** in an outreach service assessed that an older man was at risk from inadequacies in his housing and the level of services he was receiving and she presented her concerns and recommendations to several professionals.
- **I** in a drug and alcohol service assessed that a woman was at risk from domestic violence and made recommendations to her supervisor about an agreed approach from the service.

- **A** in a carers service assessed that a young carer was becoming increasingly isolated so pursued his manager for agreement to services that were not usually provided.

A feature of these less formal assessment and recommendations was that they often involved the student taking the initiative to step beyond the specific remit of their role or their agencies role for the sake of the wellbeing of the service user. This could be interpreted as examples of students using their discretion by adapting their remit as a consequence of “principled commitment” (Evans 2013 p739). I will go on to discuss that responsibility toward service users was a driver for skills development for some participants **(4:3:1)**. As discussed **(2:7:2)** Eruat (2007) found that the ‘value’ of the work and ‘commitment’ to the work were factors affecting learning at work. Similarly Webster-Wright (2010) found that engagement in practice that professionals care about to be important to learning **(2:7:2)**. My findings concur with this. In their narration of events participants displayed a drive to understand what was going on in the lives of the service users they encountered and an enthusiasm for being in a position where they could make a difference.

As these examples of less formal assessments were often from first placements they were usually the first experience the participant had of using their professional authority to effect positive change for service users. However, participants did not always initially recognise them as examples of professional judgement despite clearly incorporating the assessment of need and risk, reaching conclusions and making recommendations. These examples were often shared later in the interview. It may be that the term ‘assessment’ in social work has become synonymous with a predefined statutory process. It may therefore be the case that when asked for examples of professional judgement participants initially gravitated toward discussing these predefined assessments as the most explicit mechanism for exercising their professional

judgement. However this lack of recognition of using professional judgement was not only confined to placements in third sector organisations. There were examples in local authority placements including ‘looked after children’ and ‘care leavers’ services and in some adult mental health services where the focus for the students was on ongoing monitoring of risk and well-being rather than clearly demarcated formal statutory assessment. This appeared to obscure the students’ own perception of themselves as using professional judgement. This concurs with my own experience of social workers and students not recognising the use of their own professional judgement as discussed in Chapter 1.

The way in which participants discussed both formal and less formal ‘assessment and recommendation’ experiences concurs with professional judgement being a deliberative process. The following extract from **C** is one example of this. She is discussing her experience of professional judgement during an assessment for parental access:

**C)** And it was saying you know ‘there is part of you that thinks dad could be very controlling and that’s why you are feeling very unsettled about the fact that maybe you know the young person doesn’t feel comfortable talking about anything that could be there...there is probably an element of truth to that, maybe Dad is controlling. And again okay does that mean necessarily that something sinister is happening? Not necessarily maybe Dad is really controlling because he doesn’t really know how to let go of raising two teenage girls on his own. And maybe that is something we need to talk to dad about, how do we let the daughters have telephone contact with Mum without you being around in the background, is that okay and how do you let go of that?’

As referred to in Chapter 1, deliberation is seen by many as a key facet of professional judgement (Schwab 1970; Reid 1979; Fish & Coles 1998; Carr et al. 2011; Tripp 2011; Rutter and Brown 2012). Deliberation is understood as a weighing-up that is done before reaching what Carr et al. (2011 p5) refer to as “context-sensitive judgements”. This echoes themes in the literature review of the ‘sense-making’ and ‘weighing up’ (Keddell 2016) prevalent for qualified social workers **(2:3)**. Stage or “fluency” (Winch

2010 p188) accounts of expertise **(2:7:2)** may interpret **C**'s discussion as being characteristic of an inexperienced worker. However, set against the research on 'sense-making' it could be seen as a characteristic of professional judgement itself.

Another common feature throughout the interviews, and illustrated in this example, is deliberation incorporating what might be happening (Dad might be controlling), why it might be happening (doesn't know how to raise teenage girls) and what can be done about it (talk to Dad; let the girls have telephone calls). This illustrates deliberation that incorporates "both ends and means" (Schwab 1970 p318; Fish & Coles p281). It also includes a contextual awareness that embeds the exploration of meaning and the possible solution within the particular circumstance of this family. Similar to the research discussed in **(2:3)** (e.g. Keddell 2016; Kettle 2017) the participants were displaying professional judgement that appeared to be situationally interpreted

#### ***4.2.2 Unexpected events***

Some experiences shared by the participants featured unanticipated situations that put them into a position of having to respond and decide upon a course of action. Examples include

- At an event where there was no other staff, a father asks to talk to **M** and disclosed possible abusive behaviour toward a child
- **K** had to talk to a distressed young person when her Grandmother had just died.
- **I** had to respond to a sudden potential breakdown of a temporary foster placement where the young person was very distressed.



These examples required an immediate response that could not have been planned. However, an element of deliberation was still usually present. When reflecting on these incidents the participants were able to narrate the reasoning that had informed their response. Participant **I** talked about working out what the options were and how to gauge the level of distress of the young person and how this might be ameliorated. **M** described his “weighing-up” of the situation following the father’s disclosure. His deliberation can also be seen to include ‘ends and means’ as discussed above (**4:2:1**) because his narration includes discussion of what might be happening, why it might be happening and what he should do.

a) What might be happening?

**M** “So instantly I started thinking about all that stuff and, like, analysing it... this sounds potentially like significant harm, really, because you've got, like, the emotional aspect, but then, you know, excessive use of corporal punishment.. So, for me, I was, like, this is a big deal in that context. But also it was just the way he was describing it, just it all sounded like the whole environment in the home”

b) Why it might be happening?

**M** “He was, basically, saying, I need help; we need help”.

c) What can/should be done?

**M** “text my supervisor as soon as I get out of here”; “Offer him an appointment to come and talk to us”

This indicates that deliberation as a mechanism of professional judgement was not confined to occasions where there was an extended time for preparation and response. **M** prefaced this explanation about how he came to his decision with the comment “it just felt really quite intuitive”. It could be concluded that this ‘intuitive’ response is illustrative of **M** moving into a more expert realm of practice according to expertise stage accounts. However, as discussed (**1:4**) Klein (1999 p33) argued that what we perceive to be intuition is a system of “recognizing things without knowing how we do the recognizing”. What we perceive to be intuition is actually us using our experience

to “recognize key patterns that indicate the dynamic of the situation” (1999 p31). **M**’s detailed narration about how he had come to his conclusion would seem to substantiate that it was not intuition in our popular use of the term.

Participants who shared ‘unexpected event’ experiences always did so in addition to ‘assessment and recommendation’ experiences and seemed comfortable to interpret both as examples of professional judgement. This may indicate that they had no difficulty in recognising the varying conceptualisations of professional judgement as part of their practice experience.

#### ***4.2.3 Decisions about an approach***

As discussed in Chapter 3, I could not always initially identify how the examples of practice chosen by the participants were related to a critical incident about professional judgement. Examples chosen by some participants were still grounded in practice experiences but they appeared as general formative episodes. It took further scrutiny of the data to understand that the professional judgement element in these examples of practice was in relation to decisions the participants had taken about how to work with people and what approaches to take. Related to this was consideration of their own effectiveness. This approach to the interpretation of professional judgement was particularly in evidence for participants **B**, **D** and **L** although it was present to a lesser extent across many of the interviews.

**B** talked about the realisation that he had been approaching his work with a woman with a severe physical and neurological condition through a lens of assumptions and stereotyping, and, having reflected on this, decided to alter his approach. **D** struggled to understand how to ‘get through’ to a foster carer who she judged as needing to improve the way she worked with a young person in her care. Following a combination

of factors over an extended period of time she decided to change the way in which she worked with the foster carer that shifted the relationship between them. **L** made a conscious decision to use an explicitly empowering approach to work with a woman experiencing domestic violence. These examples illustrate that the interpretation of what constitutes professional judgement is not always focused exclusively on practice outcomes but can be on choices made along the journey toward that outcome.

#### ***4.2.4 Non-participatory***

Not all experiences of professional judgement were based on active participation in that judgement, although it is worth noting that most did. Some participants shared the observation of, reflection on or discussion about professional judgement that was taking place in the practice environment. A particularly pertinent example for **E** was her presence at a meeting with a pregnant woman who was being informed that her baby would be removed at birth. Even though she was not substantively involved in making the judgement or recommendation her emotional reaction to it and her 'working through' of this by herself and in supervision led to a greater understanding of the role of professional judgement and her role as a student social worker within this. Another example was **M** observing social workers robustly defending their assessment recommendations to managers and funding panels. Both had an impact on the students' understanding of professional judgement, their responsibility for it and what they needed to do to achieve this in their subsequent work.

#### ***4.2.5 Experience of professional judgement: conclusion***

The data indicate that participants were engaged in a considerable amount of professional judgement throughout their practice placements. I did not recognise in these participants the characteristics of the 'graduating student' as described by Fook

et al. (2000) **(2:7:1)**. The experiences of professional judgement they shared did not indicate them to be “detached participants in situations” (Fook et al. 2000 p60). Not only were they fully involved in situations but described complex situations in which they used their professional judgement and often appeared to have done so in a context aware, situated way. Neither was there evidence that they reduced social work to a “technical task” (Fook et al. 2000 p58). The differences in Fook et al.’s presentation of graduating students and the participants of this study may be due to the small scale of this study that cannot be considered as representative. It may however indicate that levels of expectation and/or expertise of graduating social work students have increased over the last two decades. This would run counter to perceptions of the poor quality of social work students graduating from universities and may indicate the benefit of taking an Appreciate Inquiry approach to understand good practice that has been “hidden from view” due to a “deficit culture” (Jones, Cooper & Ferguson 2008 p1) **(3:4:2)**. Fook et al. (2000) point out that students, at the point of graduating, were beginning to develop confidence through tackling increasingly complex situations. In contrast the participants of this study had already experienced complex situations, often frequently, for which they were required to arrive at their professional judgement. It could be that social work students are now involved to a greater extent in complexity of practice as was previously the case. I would suggest this is a potential area for future research.

Experiences of professional judgement were presented as a journey rather than an event which included forming, arriving at and communicating professional judgement. This could be interpreted as an amalgamation of the separate definitions of professional judgement and for decision making in social work as identified by Taylor (2013). As discussed in Chapter 1 **(1:4)** Taylor (2013) distinguishes between professional judgement and decision making in social work by defining the former as ‘assessing alternatives’ and the latter as ‘choosing between alternatives’. The

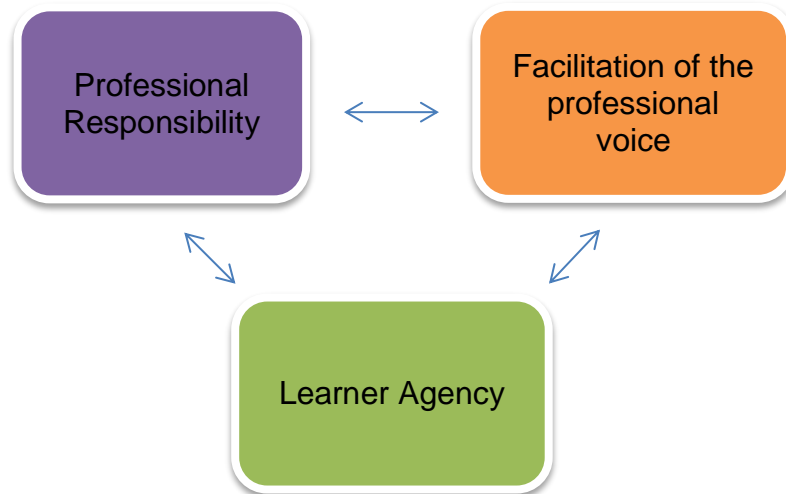
recommendations arrived at by participants could be considered as a 'decision' in the terms as defined by Taylor even though this decision might not be acted upon. It could be interpreted that the students reached a 'decision' about their recommendation and in the course of reaching this ultimate recommendation they had made several 'decisions' along the way. On the basis of the findings it may appear a somewhat artificial endeavour to attempt to separate the concept of professional judgement from decision making. It may be more useful to understand it as an iterative process, as the participants appeared to do. There was indication that all participants understood that they were rarely the ultimate decision maker in terms of the action that would be taken, a distinction noted by Taylor (2016).

### **4.3 Developing skills for professional judgement: Three domains**

In the previous section I discussed the participants' experiences of professional judgement during their practice placements. In this section I will present and further discuss the findings in order to explore how the participants developed these skills and in doing so will address the research questions.

In Chapter 3 I described the data analysis process (3:13). I explained how I moved from data through coding and theme generation to arrive at a conceptual model of three domains that characterise the successful development of skills for social work professional judgement (**Fig 4:1**). Examples of the relationship between chunks of data, codes, themes and the domains can be seen in (**Appendices 8-12**). It is important to highlight that learning derived from the interaction between the domains. I have illustrated this diagrammatically by the inclusion of dual directional arrows (**Fig 4:1**).

*Figure 4:1 Developing skills for social work professional judgement: Three domains*

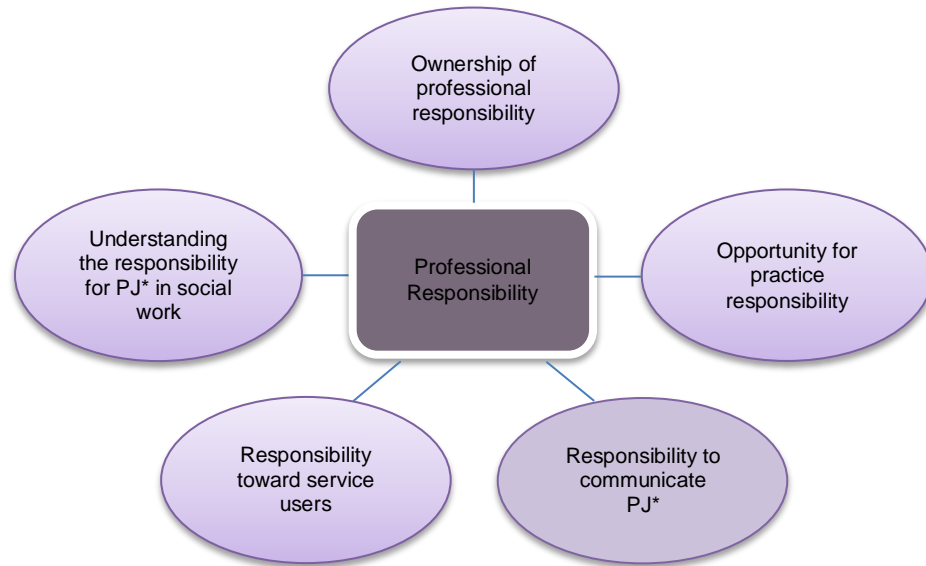


Each of these domains is associated with a group of themes which can be seen on the thematic map (**Appendix 13**). Several of these themes could be associated with more than one domain and is reflective of the interrelationship between them.

The 5<sup>th</sup> stage of Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis is to define and name the core themes. They state that the researcher should aim to identify "the essences of what each theme is about" and should be able to "describe the scope and content of each theme in a couple of sentences" (p92). For the remainder of this chapter I will present and discuss the findings under the heading of each of the three domains and begin each section by describing the essence of each one. I will then go on to explore the domain in greater depth by discussing the themes associated with it. For ease of reference, the name of each theme will be represented in italics as I progress through the discussion.

### 4.3.1 Professional Responsibility

Figure 4:2 Themes associated with the domain of professional responsibility



\*PJ = professional judgement

The domain of ‘professional responsibility’ and its associated themes can be seen in **Fig 4:2**. The essence of the domain is the student having the experience of being responsible for aspects of practice and for arriving at professional opinion about that practice. Importantly the significance of this to the participants appears to lie in their realisation of the need for and the implications of such responsibility. This realisation manifests in a sense of *ownership of professional responsibility*.

References to this sense of professional responsibility and ownership were expressed by all participants multiple times throughout the interviews. The sense of ownership was not framed as the operationalisation of their prior learned skills but was itself a key enabling factor in successfully developing these skills. As explained by participant **A**, professional judgement skills developed “by virtue of *having* to make the decisions”. Responsibility fuelled the increase in professional confidence enabling students to

move along a continuum from feelings of 'I know I need to do this' to feelings of 'yes I can do this'. This supports an interpretation of the notion of confidence as self-efficacy (2:8) conceptualised by Bandura (1977) and applied to professional learning by Eraut (2007) and social work practice by Parker (2005; 2006). The following data extract is illustrative of this:

**D)** That piece of work was such a responsibility that it helped me build my confidence, it helped me build my own personal confidence but also my confidence in being able to relate to anybody that I was assessing

In this extract **D** is indicating that responsibility gave her confidence and this in turn enabled her to have belief in her ability to complete similar future work. It provided her with the necessary "efficacy expectation" (Bandura 1977 p193)

The importance of having *opportunities for practice responsibility* was evident throughout all the interviews. Holding a caseload and the work this involved was mentioned frequently but so were other types of work such as this example:

**H)** We (H and a fellow student) did the project with the families and I think that was really crucial and then being really quite autonomous and then going forth with ideas and cementing our own stamp on things

In my exploratory study similar sentiments were shared by the participants and I labelled this theme simply as 'autonomy'. At the time I was using the word in a less nuanced way than I have since understood it. I will discuss this in depth in Chapter 5. The theme of 'autonomy' in my exploratory study focused mainly on the value of undertaking work by oneself. Several practice examples that the participants shared in the exploratory study were about occasions when it was the first time they had done something by themselves or had to make a decision by themselves. I have explored this in a journal article (Rawles 2016). Whilst conducting the interviews and the data



analysis for this thesis my interpretation of what the participants were conveying took a broader perspective. I realised that the significance for the participants of this independent work lay in the way it allowed them to embody the responsibility of the social worker role and their cognisance of it doing so. It was therefore a much broader concept than merely doing work by oneself. The following extracts illustrate the importance of having that responsibility. These were responses to me asking why an aspect of practice they had shared had been important to their learning:

**A)** I think holding a caseload. I felt a lot of ownership over everything that was in my caseload..... and knowing that the kind of – although it didn't, because I was a student - that the buck stopped with me. I think knowing that meant that when I got given information I also felt the need to act on it as well because it wasn't like someone else was going to deal with that, "Oh, actually I'm the one dealing with that." So it was almost like by virtue of *having* to make the decisions.

**C)** Knowing that you are going to be accountable and it was my name as the author on the report and I was the one sitting there with the judge, right there, and if she had any questions I would be the person.....I knew the case, it was my assessment.

**N)** Because I am doing the assessment. I am assessing the situation, you did your previous assessment based on whatever the situation was at that time, I am going in with fresh eyes now and I am having to do this and I am having to make judgements based on what I see not based on what someone else has said.

As I concluded in Chapter 2 **(2:8)**, all the research I reviewed on professional learning mentioned the value of "learning from practice itself" (Gola 2009) and from the "challenge" (Eraut 2007) of the work. My research concurs with this but also suggests that one of the reasons that carrying out this practice may be valuable to professional learning is in the experience of responsibility. Webster-Wright (2010 p115) referred to the "embodied" change that took place from the authentic professional learning of her participants, which did not merely change what the professionals could do but changed who they are as professionals **(2:7:2)**. This was also the case for the participants of my study. The participants developed an understanding of themselves as professionals who had responsibility. This developed in tandem with them *understanding the*

*responsibility of professional judgement in social work* as the two following extracts illustrate:

**M)** Going through that, kind of, personal process of, actually, this isn't about just pleasing them; this is about my professional judgement. And then actually realising you know, like, the power of that really and thinking, god, I've got this professional judgement now about people that I don't know that well.... you go in, do the piece of work, make a load of big decisions, and then disappear again and leave them with the consequences. (Laughs)... But also that idea of being a practitioner and you are out there practising social work, the things you do and say have an impact, and that you need to have skills to do that, really. I never saw it as skills beforehand. I just thought I was just being nice, just helping out.

**K)** I think it was in the middle (of the placement) when I started to, kind of believe in the authority of the role and just trying to, kind of, work within that. Because there were some other cases where I'd felt my decisions could be, sort of, not have that much impact because I was a student,

This comment from **K** illustrates her increased self-efficacy as she begins to see herself as capable of embodying the authority of a social worker rather than assuming her decisions will have no impact because she is a student. The following extract directly expresses the link between a sense of responsibility and ownership with the development of skills for professional judgement:

**E)** As I took more ownership for the cases I was involved with I started thinking more about why I'm making the decisions I'm making

Having the *responsibility to communicate professional judgement* was also important. Communication of professional judgement could be associated with all three domains. The reason that I have associated it with the domain of professional responsibility is that the requirement to express professional judgement both influenced and was influenced by ownership of professional judgement. This communication could be verbal or written, often as a recommendation in an assessment. The following extracts illustrate why this was important:

**H)** Because it was written and I had to do a written assessment and I had to write it all down and had to write my decisions down. So again I suppose the record keeping kind of made me kind of think about it a bit more because I *had* to record my decisions and the reasons why I made that decision and what I thought.

**C)** I think presenting the Section 37 assessment...I think there was just confidence, really definitely it was more of a confidence thing, I think I could have got to know the family, I could have done the assessment, I could have done the paperwork. But in terms of feeling ready to explain your thinking and defend your work I guess and just feeling confident in the decision that you have made, it being the right one.

As discussed **(2:7:2)** Cheetham & Chivers (2001) found that ‘articulation’ was one of the factors important for professional learning. They state that “being forced to articulate their work either orally or in writing...was a great source of learning identified by all” (p278). I would concur as this was also the case for the participants of this study. Cheetham & Chivers use of the word “forced” indicates that it was not just ‘doing’ the articulation that was the crux of the learning but the responsibility for having to articulate. The word ‘force’ was also used by participants in my study to similarly characterise this sense of the responsibility both to arrive at their own professional judgement and to articulate it.

The final theme association with the domain of professional responsibility is *responsibility towards service users*. Whilst the participants often discussed their responsibility toward the social work role, they also spoke of their responsibility toward the people with whom they were working. Participant **A** talked about wanting the service users not to be “short-changed” because of his inadequate skills in presenting their needs to a multi-disciplinary forum. He considered it his responsibility to hone his skills for the sake of the service users with whom he worked because it was “not fair (to them) if you don’t get it right”. The following quotation is similar in that the participant perceives that the wellbeing of the family rests on her being able to understand them sufficiently.

**F)** I think I felt responsible in the fact that I was working with the family, so I had to take ownership for the fact that I knew the dynamics of the family. And I think when it's your case, no-one should really know the case better than the person who's working it.

As discussed in the previous section **(4:2:1)** there were several examples of the participants pushing the boundaries of the remit of the agencies within which they were placed. This was as a consequence of their sense of responsibility for the well-being of service users. This was particularly the case in third sector agencies where the participants identified risk or un-met need.

The research on professional learning I reviewed **(2:7:2)** mentions the benefits to learning from the 'clients' themselves. The research for this study also indicates that participants felt a responsibility to develop their skills in order to enhance the wellbeing of users.

I discussed the apparent importance of 'responsibility' and 'ownership' with the participants when we met as a focus group. They unequivocally recognised the importance of responsibility to their learning and discussed it being highly significant particularly in being able to understand one's authority as a social worker. However, they broadened my interpretation by suggesting that there was perhaps a further stage to the relevance of responsibility and that was the realisation that they were not responsible for everything. They stated that maybe the first stage of responsibility can cause anxiety or be overwhelming because you think you have to know everything and do not know everything. They then move into what one participant called a "comfort zone" and accept and understand uncertainty. This was described by one of the participants as "feeling secure in my insecurity". The notion of uncertainty will be discussed further under the domain of learner agency **(4:3:3)**. This transition through varying experiences of responsibility illustrates the nuance of the learning journey. There was however, compelling evidence in this research that professional

responsibility is formative to professional learning and responsibility for professional judgement is formative to the enhancement of skills for professional judgement.

#### 4.3.2 *Facilitation of the professional voice*

**Figure 4:3** Themes associated with the domain of facilitation of the professional voice



The domain of 'facilitation of the professional voice' and its associated themes can be seen in **Fig 4:3**. The essence of this domain is the interventions of others to facilitate, enable and encourage the student to formulate, express and explain their professional opinion and judgement. These 'others' were usually the PE, supervisor, or less frequently, the team or service manager. They were also practice colleagues and student colleagues.

The contributions that fit within this domain were present throughout all interviews. As I progressed through data analysis I realised there were two key interrelated aspects to this facilitation. One is what I will term 'active facilitation'. This was the *active encouragement of professional opinion*. The other I will term 'responsive facilitation'

which was the *explicit valuing of professional opinion*. 'Active facilitation' is that which is initiated by another as a request or a specific strategy to elicit a response from the student. 'Responsive facilitation' is the affirmative or valuing response given by another to a professional opinion the student has initiated.

In its most straightforward form 'active facilitation' was expressed by the question "what do you think?" This question, despite its simplicity, proved highly influential for several participants. This was because they were placed in a position of having to arrive at a professional viewpoint and of realising that their viewpoint was being sought as a professional. The following extracts are illustrative of the powerful impact of being asked to give their own professional opinion:

**A)** I think it was an expectation that you should have opinions... I can remember one of the social workers saying, "And what do you think then?" you know, after everything, and be like, "Didn't I just tell you?" "No, you told me what you've seen, what did you think?" (laughs). "So, okay right, what did I think?" and so there was a couple of people that were quite, not challenging, but they kind of spurred you on a bit like, "Okay, that's good, and then what?"

**K)** It was a shock. Because I was, like, they wanted my professional judgement and I was, like, there's people out there that, kind of, view me as a professional. (Laughs) And I was, like, okay, what do I think? And I think that email really shocked me. And I also got another one from another head of year, also asking for my professional opinion. (Laughs) I mean, I didn't know that I was viewed in that sense. It's only when other people started saying, you know, we want your input to try and help us, or, what is it that you suggest?

**M)** (*On beginning to perceiving himself as a professional*) I think it was quite late on, actually. I think maybe towards the end of my first placement. And then that, kind of, got crystallised in my second placement when my work-based supervisor said, "So," you know, "As a practitioner, what do you think?" So I practice social work now, don't I? This isn't just, you know, a voluntary sector support worker role anymore. This is, like, my view on this complex social situation (laughs) and complex behaviours.

A feature of these instances is that they occurred as part of ongoing practice rather than a tailored learning process. This concurs with the research on work-place learning (2:7:2) which highlights that professional learning is "embedded" (Eraut 2004a

p269; Avby 2015 p95) in the activities or processes of the work. These instances could be identified as the type of learning that often “goes unrecognised” (Eraut 2004a p266) as it is not part of an intended learning event yet it played a very important part in learning for the participants. This demonstrates the valuable insights that research based on a combination of APL and RBP can bring as it allows for the illumination of that which is important to the learners themselves rather than that which has been externally defined as a teaching and learning activity.

Another feature of these extracts is that the simple question of “what do you think?” caused the participants to be disrupted in their thinking. This resulted in reflection on what their viewpoint might be, as well as the realisation that it was part of their role to have a viewpoint.

‘Active facilitation’ was also used as an intentional strategy by PEs and others to elicit the students’ professional judgement. This process was referred to by several participants as “drawing it out of me” or using “a lot of probing questions” and by three participants as being “forced” to reach their own professional view with one laughing and adding “in a good way!” The following extracts illustrate specific ‘active facilitation’ strategies employed by PEs:

**J)** He (PE) would always say, “Don’t whiteboard me.” Which means don’t come to a discussion unless you’ve got some ideas. It doesn’t matter if you’ve got a final conclusion, just some ideas of where you’re going, what you’re doing. And that kind of helped me more as well think about, “Before I go and offload all this stuff to him, I need to think about where I’m going with it.”

**G)** My practice educator was very, very good, and I think when he started to bring dilemmas or situations to discuss, and then he would ask “what would you do in this situation?” And I think it was then that I learned to respond and give my views and professional judgement on things.

**I)** I did get kind of encouraged quite early on to say what I thought.

*Interviewer:* - And how were you encouraged to do that?

I was just asked, if I went with a problem, then asked kind of what do *you* think? But in quite, a sort of probably like more of an open discussion about what, just so that I could kind of learn what might be the way to deal with it.

PEs who engaged in this were highly valued by participants. It was perceived as key to them building their ability to formulate and communicate professional judgement. Participant **B** summed this up by concluding that what had helped him develop his professional judgement was being “facilitated to come up with my own judgement” and that this was down to “the skills of those supervising me”.

As discussed in the literature review **(2.7.2)**, Cheetham & Chivers (2001 p278) found that “being forced to articulate” their work was “a great source of learning” for the participants of their study. This was similarly evident throughout my findings, as has been referred to in relation to professional responsibility **(4:3:1)**. I make reference to ‘articulation’ again here because it has relevance to the domain of ‘facilitation of the professional voice’ by identifying and highlighting the role of others in enabling and encouraging this articulation. As one participant indicated, they were being “forced to come up with the goods”.

‘Active facilitation’ was closely linked to the benefit experienced from *positive challenge*. Inherent in all the extracts above is that the participants were being challenged to ‘think’ and arrive at their own professional judgement. However, simply articulating a viewpoint does not guarantee that this viewpoint is informed by a considered analysis of evidence and knowledge. If we are to understand the concept of ‘skills’ as I have presented it in Chapter 1 **(1:5)**, then skilled social work professional judgement requires more than offering a professional viewpoint, it needs to be an informed viewpoint. Whilst questions of ‘what do you think?’ appeared to be an invaluable first step, understanding *why* you think it, and being able to substantiate



this, should constitute part of the skill of professional judgement in social work. An approach valued by participants was being challenged to explain why and how they had arrived at their position. The following extracts illustrate the benefits participants derived from this:

**D)** It was very helpful that I had the practice educator to go back to and discuss things like that with. I found it quite good that she would often challenge my perspectives as well. So it was that thought process of where is it coming from? Where is the theory behind what you're saying? So it's not all about going on a rant and these are my feelings about something, you know, but it was more to do with what's happening there. So why do you think that's happening? Or for any decisions that I made she got me thinking in a mind-frame of why I'm doing something, how I'm doing it

**G)** There were situations where I felt confident with the decision that I'd made based on working with that service user and learning about their experiences. But then he (PE) would challenge me and my thought process on why I've come to that decision. And I think that was really useful, having that style, kind of thought provoking and challenging me and trying to learn from the start to the end of how I came to that decision and what it was based on.

Constructive challenge has been identified as positive in research into the relationship between social work PEs and students (e.g. Fortune 2001; Knight 2000) **(2:7:2)**. Eraut (2004a) identifies challenge as being required for learning at work and as deriving from undertaking the work itself **(2:7:2)**. My research also identified this to be the case, as can be seen in my discussion of professional responsibility **(4:3:1)**. It is possible to identify Eraut's reference to challenge to include the challenge of arriving at, substantiating and articulating your professional judgement. For social work, as in other professions, this function does constitute an element of undertaking the work of social work.

'Responsive facilitation' was also highly valued by the participants as it provided *explicit valuing of professional opinion*. I refer to this approach as 'responsive facilitation' rather than merely 'feedback' in order to highlight the active function of this

for the participants. The development of their skills for professional judgement was enhanced or facilitated as a consequence of the way in which others responded to them offering their view. It was recognised as an important ingredient to increase confidence by providing, as referred to by participant **B**, some “old-fashioned reassurance”. There is an explicit link found in the data between this reassurance and self-efficacy as exemplified by the following extract:

**K)** When somebody tells you you're doing things correctly and keep doing what you're doing, that was the moment that I started to actually have that self-belief that I was doing the right thing, because, you know, somebody else has confirmed it. I wasn't going to start telling myself, very modest, like, yeah, I'm great. But she (PE) said you're doing it and I'm not concerned about you actually going out there right now and doing this role.

This type of feedback had benefits in enabling students to believe that they could function as a social worker. The value of giving feedback is highlighted in all research into professional learning (**4:3:1**). What I found helped the participants in developing skills for professional judgement more specifically was having their viewpoint acknowledged and valued rather than solely their general abilities. In the following extract **J** links her PE's approach to increased self-efficacy in professional judgement:

**J)** I got listened to a lot, which was brilliant. My practice educator there, he kind of made me a bit more confident about my professional judgement than the first person did (PE in first placement) because he would listen and he would take what I said on board.. and he'd be like, “No, I trust your judgement on this.” And that was definitely the confidence boost in terms of what I now use.

Responsive facilitation appeared particularly beneficial to participants when their viewpoint was valued despite differing from that of others, including the PE. This is illustrated in the following extract:

**H)** I think I kind of wanted to push for the family to have longer term work but in discussions with my practice educator I kind of got the impression that she didn't feel that, but because I expressed that, she kind of supported me to kind of come to that

decision and she said if that's what I think – so she valued my opinion and my judgement on that assessment.

Participants also highlighted occasions when their conclusions differed from other colleagues or external professionals. In all such occasions they reported increased self-belief if their view was valued and taken seriously and not dismissed out of hand due to their student status. Active facilitation and responsive facilitation were often symbiotic so that the impact for the student derived from being asked for their view which in turn meant that their view was valued and warranted. This can be seen in **N's** reaction in this extract:

**N)** I did feel kind of chuffed when the child's social worker was asking me questions based on what I thought as a student social worker, I am like oooh, you know, I felt it was quite a compliment that she asked me, well what do you think? What do you think I should do in this circumstance? Which kind of made me feel like, yeah you are arriving, you are getting there because this is someone who has obviously got experience and is willing to take on board the views of a student.

Inherent in this extract is the sense of a journey towards self-efficacy and pivotal to this is the impact of belief in her abilities as expressed by others.

Most participants discussed experiencing self-doubt and a small number referred to more general anxiety early on in their placements. They attributed this to their status as a student and to anxiety about not knowing what to do or the consequences of a wrong decision. I will discuss 'doubt' in the context of uncertainty under the domain of learner agency **(4:3:3)**. Its relevance to the domain of 'facilitation of the professional' voice is that the *positive response to self-doubt* appeared pivotal to the self-efficacy required for the development of skills for professional judgement. This also relates to the theme of professional responsibility **(4:3:1)**. The participants were beginning to accept ownership of their judgement but this was often accompanied by self-doubt. It was the way in which this self-doubt was responded to that influenced self-efficacy. The

following extract indicates the effect of a *positive response to self-doubt*. This was accomplished by a combination of 'responsive facilitation' and 'active facilitation':

**H)** I think I doubted myself a lot but I think partly my practice educator helped me and the people that I worked with kind of drew it out of me, and even though she didn't maybe always agree with the decision that I made, she's like, "But you know this family and you've been working with this family." So she helped me to kind of you know, sort of, "Why do you feel that this is the right decision?"

Conversely, the extract below indicates an erosion of confidence when there is no positive response to the participant offering her viewpoint. The participant begins to doubt herself which leads to her questioning her valid concerns about the child:

**J)** I just remember trying to tell my manager how I felt about it and it didn't really get taken seriously until the GP got concerned about things as well. So it was almost like I'd made my professional judgement that something wasn't right with this case, that maybe the previous conclusions weren't quite fitting right, but it was a struggle that as a student I didn't really feel listened to...it definitely impacted on my confidence in my own views and you know, "Am I going the right way with this case?"

Another participant said it was "quite easy to slip into doubting" herself if someone did not agree with her viewpoint and called this "an automatic reaction". She then said once she had "stepped back" and thought about it and "obviously" discussed it with her PE she regained confidence by understanding why she had arrived at her viewpoint.

There were examples such as these throughout the data. It was not only verbally that this *positive response to self-doubt* was effective. Feedback from managers and others on assessments and other written reports provided a profound sense of validity for some. One participant was influenced by written feedback left on a case file by an external auditor. She had found her work with a family challenging and began to doubt her approach. The auditor, noticing she was a student, left a comment to say that she

should “keep trying” in the approach she had decided upon. The participant was very encouraged by someone external being able to see what she was attempting to do and validating this approach. She said “It just made me feel confident, I think, in giving it more of a go”.

The importance of feedback and support is highlighted in the literature I reviewed on professional learning **(2:7:2)**. Eraut (2004a) places “support” in the “triangular relationship” required for workplace learning, together with challenge and confidence. However the quality of the relationship was seen as more important than whether the person providing feedback was supervisor, mentor or peer, (Cheetham & Chivers 2001; Eraut 2004a; Webster-Wright 2010). The data for this study indicate that what made ‘facilitation of the professional voice’ successful was the non-threatening and supportive way that it was enacted so that the student did not feel judged, as illustrated by this extract:

**C)** They weren't judgemental, I never felt like I was barking up the wrong tree or it was wrong for me to feel uncertain. It was very supportive and that definitely allowed me to go through that process of not being worried about, not being judged for getting it wrong and being supported and knowing that I could go and speak to anybody in the team or my practice educator at any point if I was really worried. I had a lot of support.

Humour appeared to be part of the dynamic of an effective relationship for several participants. For example **J** expressed the phrase “don't whiteboard me” used by her PE as a humorous interaction. Positive relationships meant that the challenge that is necessary for developing professional judgement was embedded in a nurturing environment. The impact of this was that it maximised learning by assisting to positively re-frame self-doubt. To quote from the participants, they were being “forced” to “come up with the goods”, “but in a good way!”

The participants of the focus group substantiated the importance of being both encouraged and supported to develop and express their professional judgement. They discussed the way in which they had been “coaxed” into arriving at their professional judgement without even realising it which made it “less scary”. They described the most important aspect of this for their development as being encouraged to articulate why and how they had arrived at their judgement.

When I discussed this facilitation role in relation to the PE, one participant said it did not have to be the PE, it could be other people fulfilling this function. Others agreed and said it was usually the PE because she or he had the time and space to do this within the supervision expectations. This concurs with the findings of Cheetham & Chivers (2001) and Eraut (2004a), as discussed above, that having the designated role of supervisor or mentor is not the most important factor.

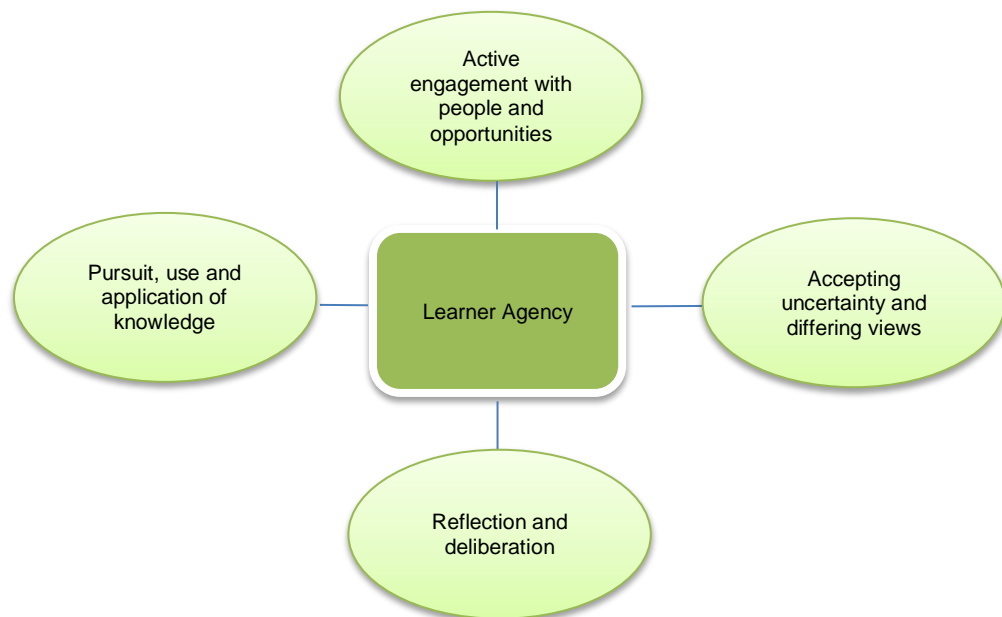
Having their opinions valued was also acknowledged as important. At the outset of the focus group I discussed the apparent importance of ‘responsibility’ in the data. The initial response from one participant was to link the benefits from responsibility with her professional judgement being “validated” which in turn increased her self-efficacy. She stated:

If you feel that you've taken ownership of a case or you have case responsibility and then the feedback that you get – like once I've completed an assessment, the feedback consolidates what I thought which then gives me more confidence to practice for each case.

This extract illustrates the value in conceptualising the three domains as interrelated and impacting upon one another.

### 4.3.3 Learner agency

Figure 4:4 Themes associated with the domain of learner agency



The domain of 'learning agency' and its associated themes can be seen in **Fig 4:4**. It represents the participants' recognition of themselves as learners and their endeavours to be proactive in developing their expertise. This appeared to be an important mechanism for maximising the learning achieved from holding responsibility and being facilitated in that responsibility. It was what the students themselves brought to this endeavour and, like the other domains, references to this were present across all interviews.

A key element of this domain was *active engagement with people and opportunities*. It involved interaction with others in order to develop professionally. This included practice educators, colleagues, other professionals and other students. Some participants were proactive in asking for feedback. Participant **D** asked her supervisor to observe her on a home visit with a foster carer when she wanted feedback to help

her improve her approach. Others sought opportunities to observe practice. Participant **L** approached the consultant psychiatrist in her team to ask if she could sit with him when he met his patients so that she could learn more about mental health conditions. All participants discussed multiple occasions of being engaged in conversations, asking questions and what was referred to as “bouncing off people” or “working things through with people”. Several participants referred to “using other people”. This sense of ‘using’ others encapsulates the active nature of the interaction, with the student intentionally wanting to get something out of the exchange or observation.

The following extract illustrates the active ‘agency’ of the participant when attending team meetings in a multi-disciplinary mental health team:

**A)** The first few meetings that I watched it was very difficult to understand and I think it’s because people were reading off of screens and they were quickly scrolling through information very quickly – it was just a barrage of information and I just didn’t understand probably the first three team meetings that I sat in because they’re fast paced, you know, it’s a referrals meeting, it’s a feedback meeting, it’s a joint decision meeting, it’s closed. It’s over before you know it. Firstly I didn’t know what was significant information and what wasn’t significant information so that was quite important to find out and I used to just kind of sit over people’s shoulders and watch what they were scrolling onto so I watched people quite intently for the first few meeting and I think, you know, that really helped me see which bits I liked and which bits I thought, “Oh actually, I don’t need to do that.”

The extract indicates firstly, **A** being aware that he too would have to present cases; secondly identifying a gap in his knowledge and skills; thirdly devising a learning strategy to meet this gap and fourthly pursuing this strategy in order to increase his professional effectiveness. The extract also indicates that he was able to go beyond simply copying other people and was able to discriminate between approaches and decide on which to adopt.

Research on professional learning and social work placement learning highlight the benefits of observing and working alongside others (Maidment 2000; Cheetham &



Chivers 2001; Fortune 2001; Eraut 2004a; Bogo 2006). The extract from participant **A** provides an example of what the student actually *does* in the situation rather than what the activity *is*, thus enabling us to understand more fully how learning takes place. Many students could have been given the opportunity to “observe a team meeting” but it is the agency of the student that transforms this into an active learning episode.

Knowledge is an important dimension of professional judgement. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine the extent to which knowledge informs professional judgement. Its relevance to this thesis lies in the part knowledge plays in the participants’ skills development. I have associated knowledge with the learner agency domain because it was the students’ *pursuit, use and application of knowledge* that was evident in the findings. This included formal knowledge such as theory, research and law as well as procedural knowledge, practice evidence and knowledge of professional judgement and decision making itself. Some participants included reference to knowledge almost as an aside when discussing practice situations but in doing so reveal the way in which the knowledge informed this practice. This is illustrated in the following extract:

**G)** I’d read quite widely on work with unaccompanied minors, I’d read a lot about – there’s lots of discrimination against age and assuming that every young person comes through is just trying to come through and say they’re under 18 just to get service. So that’s something I was reading so I was able to not become a part of that (*negative talk in the office*), because I’d read a lot more about their journeys..... There was one piece of work that I did with a young person and I took him to the home office and it just felt that I was a bit more genuine with him because I understood

Others spoke more generally about knowledge but still related it to utility to practice as in the following extract:

**B)** I think throughout my two years here (*on the social work programme*) I felt like a real determination to kind of embed this theoretical basis. So I found that the more that I read and the more kind of I could directly relate what I was reading into my

practice, the more empowered, enabled, assured I kind of became and the lesser my personal insecurities became as well, my professional insecurities. So yeah, it was very – so that really, really helped.

This indicates a proactive stance toward the learning of knowledge but also indicates an iterative process between knowledge and practice. This ‘use’ of knowledge for practice is illustrative of Eraut’s (1994 p33) concept of knowledge being “reinterpreted” in practice in a “symbiotic relationship”. Eraut’s (2004a) stages of knowledge-use in the workplace as previously presented **(2.7.2)** are relevant here and participant **B**’s statement resonates with these stages. Eraut’s conceptualisation rests in an integration of knowledge and practice rather than the transfer of knowledge to practice. Extracts from several participants indicate ‘integration’ rather than ‘transfer’. In the extracts below, the participants described this movement back and forth between activities in university and placement learning:

**C)** I guess every time you write an essay you have to solidify your thinking a little bit and that definitely helps, like for me my learning comes through not only the placements but that experience of an assignment because you have to really sit down and make yourself think about stuff and I think that always helps. So I definitely think it was through the process of the assignments and the more reflective ones in particular I think.

**E)** The more I think being at uni kind of encouraged me to, through like discussions in class and stuff, I think, if there’s certain things that I don’t have knowledge of, or things that come up in discussions, then I’ll go away and kind of look into it myself and get my own research and form my own opinion of it. So I think, through learning, that’s kind of, the more I’ve learnt, the more confident I felt, I think, because it’s also the knowledge and how that then impacts on what your opinion is, professionally.

The final stage in Eraut’s (2004a p256) conceptualisation of knowledge use **(2.7.2)** is: “Integrating them (knowledge and skills) with other knowledge and skills in order to think/act/communicate in the new setting”. It was this ability at integration, reflected in extracts above that characterised learner agency for the participants. In Chapter 1 I discuss the concept of ‘skills’ **(1.5)** and refer to Winch’s use of the term ‘transversal

abilities'. It is these skills in connecting learning between situations and environments that appeared beneficial.

Another theme I associate with learner agency is *reflection and deliberation*. As with 'knowledge', reflection it is a concept that cannot be explored fully in this thesis. Reflection was explicitly mentioned in all interviews. It should be acknowledged however that the term 'reflection' is used liberally and often indiscriminately. In Chapter 5 I will discuss notions of 'reflection' and 'critical reflection' as they are applied to concepts of autonomy. My use of the term 'reflection' here is to encapsulate occasions when students had actively and knowingly subjected their thought processes and their developing professional opinion to scrutiny. There were also many other occasions throughout the interviews when this was implicit, where reflection was not named by the students but they were describing engaging in a form of reflective deliberation. Data extracts presented in **(4.2)** provide examples of the deliberation engaged in by the participants.

I recognised early in the data analysis that there were different ways in which the participants experienced reflection. I sub-divided the node in Nvivo10 into self-reflection, being facilitated in reflection, informal reflection with others and written reflection. Further data analysis indicated that the participants displayed different preferences for ways in which to engage in reflection. This was discussed at length in the focus group with some preferring written reflection and other preferring reflective discussions. This may indicate a disadvantage to using prescriptive mechanisms to aid reflection in a 'one size fits all' approach as this might not be the most useful to all students.

As discussed in relation to the literature **(2.3.1)**, uncertainty is a fundamental element of professional judgement. It underpins the inherent complexity of practice and its

successful navigation is the cornerstone of a skilled approach to social work professional judgement. The findings of my research indicate that for most of the participants, *accepting uncertainty and differing views* proved to be pivotal to their transition to understanding social work professional judgement. As discussed (4.3.2) uncertainty was linked to self-doubt which was often ameliorated by the interventions of the PE. Misplaced notions of the requirements for absolute certainty were associated with the anxiety felt by the participants at the early stages of their placements. This anxiety was underpinned by fear of the consequences of a 'wrong' decision as can be seen in the following extracts:

**F)** It made me realise that social work can be really scary because what if I wasn't right?

**I)** I was very aware of making the wrong decision

**C)** I had a lot of, "If I get this wrong, what's going to happen?"

**N)** For a while I was kind of afraid to say things, because I think oh well, it might be wrong or what if I suggest this and then it doesn't really kind of work out well?

These comments are in contrast to the following extracts in which two of the same participants describe how they felt about professional judgement toward the end of their placements:

**C)** Understanding what that uncertainty is around gave me the confidence in saying 'Yeah, well I could be wrong, but this is my decision and this is why it's my decision' and being able to kind of explain that and defend it and stand behind it.

**I)** I was able to trust my decision making skills because I realised I was able to analyse information properly ... as I get more information things change. So the fact that I was kind of open to all those changes I think that kind of helped my decision making because I wasn't just rigid I was trying to analyse the information, I was also tapping in from other people's experiences of things and how they view things

Another participant described how she learned to “sit with uncertainty”. Mason (1993 p189) discusses the notions of “safe uncertainty” saying that uncertainty can either lead to paralysis or creativity. In the data extracts presented, contrasting early to later placement experiences, it appears that the participants were making the transition between those two states during the course of their social work education.

What appears to influence that change for some was the realisation that, in social work, there is rarely one definitive correct response. In this extract H had been deliberating about a situation with a family and he receives two contrasting views from colleagues he respects. This becomes a moment of realisation for him:

**H)** So for me that was really interesting because I was talking to two managers, two social workers, and who you know, had a lot of experience but both came up with different opinions

Wilkins (2015), in his research on referral decisions **(2.3.1)** discusses the importance of social workers’ skilful approach toward ‘knowns’ and ‘unknowns’. This also appears to be an important component of learning for the participants of my study.

## **4.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have discussed how the participants experienced professional judgement on placement. I then went on to present the conceptual model of the three domains and explored the themes associated with them. The participants had a great deal of experience of professional judgement whilst on placement and were involved with some complex work. The presence and interaction of professional responsibility, facilitation of their professional voice and their own learner agency gave rise to learning and enabled them to develop skills for professional judgement. This appeared to

prepare them for the complexity inherent in social work as identified in the research reviewed in Chapter 2.

# 5 A re-appraisal of ‘autonomy’

## 5.1 Introduction

The HCPC Standards of Proficiency for England state that a social worker must “be able to practise as an autonomous professional, exercising their own professional judgement” (HCPC 2017 p6). When I first considered this statement I did not problematize the use of the word ‘autonomous’, my focus was primarily on ‘exercising their own professional judgement’. In the development and ongoing scrutiny of the thematic map (**Appendix 13**) I realised that the three domains discussed in Chapter 4 related to the concept of autonomy. To have responsibility and ownership is autonomy enacted, to facilitate the professional voice is to encourage and enable autonomy and to have agency in learning is to autonomously pursue a goal. To explore and understand the concept of autonomy could therefore provide a useful lens by which to scrutinise the essence of the phenomena of developing skills for professional judgement in order to further our understanding of this aspect of social work education.

The word autonomy is derived from the Greek for self (autos) and rule or law (nomos) (Dworkin 1988). The concept of autonomy is multi-faceted and “debates abound” as to what it means as well as whether it is desirable or achievable (Ashley 2012 p1). Conly (2013 p25) characterises it as a “portmanteau” word because it encompasses many “distinct concepts”. In my experience of social work practice and social work education autonomy is often a word that is misunderstood and misused as it is perceived to be synonymous with independence where independence is characterised as doing things by oneself. There are many definitions of autonomy, and each is debated, but one which I consider useful to illuminate the distinction is the following:

Autonomy means to act volitionally, with a sense of choice, whereas independence means to function alone and not rely on others (Deci & Ryan 2008 p16/17)

The notion of volition is useful as it emphasises the role of the person in deciding for him or herself as opposed to the process of decision making or the outcome of that which is decided. As Frankfurt (1971 p15) concluded, to be volitional means a person's "will" can be free "despite the fact that he is not free to translate his desires into actions". This is particularly useful when transposed to the context of social work professional judgement because it accepts that to volitionally make a decision or recommendation does not pre-suppose that decision or recommendation being enacted. So, for example a social worker can bring to bear their professional judgement about a situation and they can still be considered as acting volitionally even if their judgement or recommendation is not taken up by the ultimate decision maker. The concept of autonomy as volitional therefore works well to explore the themes of this thesis. As was discussed in Chapter 1 and 2, literature about social work decision making and professional judgement includes debates about the extent to which the role of professional autonomy or discretion does or should play a part. Rarely, however, is the concept of autonomy itself scrutinised as a mechanism to help understand what may be happening, particularly in terms of the development of skills related to professional judgement.

Theories of autonomy have a place in many different disciplines. In order to explore the findings of this thesis research further I intend to take a cross disciplinary approach and draw on specific theories of autonomy as presented in philosophy, psychology and learning theory. The reason I intend to do this is that I consider different understandings of autonomy are useful for different aspects of the findings. Another rationale for this approach is that social work is acknowledged as having its theoretical roots in several disciplines (Payne 2005; Teater 2010) and I believe there is value in



using theory pragmatically in order to assist in understanding phenomena relevant to social work. I will also argue that these different theories of autonomy all share a similar premise. I will consider the following theories

- Philosophy
  - Hierarchical theories of autonomy
  - Relational Autonomy
- Psychology
  - Supported Autonomy as a component of self-determination theory
- Learning theory
  - Autonomous learning and self-directed learning

## **5.2 Philosophy and autonomy: hierarchy theories and relational autonomy**

### ***5.2.1 Hierarchy theories and critical reflection***

There are many philosophical debates and disagreements about aspects of autonomy. However, it is now almost universally accepted that what is called individual autonomy or autonomy of the person (Sneddon 2013) must comprise some element of thinking about and appraising one's actions or one's decisions. It is this conscious evaluation that makes autonomy volitional. Frankfurt (1971 p7), in his influential article argued that free-will is characterised not by "first order impulses" but in the "second order volitions" that are used to "critically reflect" on these first order impulses. Frankfurt did not refer directly to the word autonomy but to free-will but despite this his conceptualisation is taken as one of the first presentations of what has become known as an hierarchical approach to understanding autonomy (Dworkin 1988, Sneddon 2013, Taylor 2005). It is labelled as hierarchical because autonomy is not seen to exist as the initial action or

impulse response to something but in the ability to engage higher order thoughts to think about, appraise and evaluate.

Frankfurt (1971), as well as Dworkin (1976) in his earlier work, argued that autonomy was seen to be achieved when an individual's second or higher order thoughts were congruent with their first order impulses. In other word that an individual was able to think about their initial impulses and could consciously verify these thoughts as thoughts they wanted to have or choices they wanted to make (Taylor 2005). In later work Dworkin (1988) changed his position suggesting that autonomy rested in the act of the appraisal of initial impulses itself regardless of whether this resulted in cohering with or rejecting these first order impulses. He concluded that the "crucial feature" of an autonomous individual is "their ability to reflect upon and adopt attitudes toward their first-order desires, wishes, intentions" (Dworkin 1988 p 15). This indicates that an autonomous individual reflects on choices leading to an adoption of an attitude toward these choices in order to decide whether they wish to, or how they wish to, proceed with a course of action. This reflection as a facet of autonomy has been referred to as "thinking about one's own thoughts" (Sneddon 2013 p8) and as a form of "meta-cognition" (Levinson 2008).

Before discussing the relevance of this to the themes of this thesis it is appropriate to consider how the terms 'reflection' and 'critical reflection' are being used here and how that relates to their use as a concept familiar to social work. The focus on critical reflection in this philosophical interpretation of autonomy highlights the potential relevance it has to social work given the generally accepted importance of this to social work. However, as Brookfield (2009 p 296) explains, critical reflection means "different, sometimes antithetical things" depending on the user and the tradition or discipline from which the notion is being evoked. In social work literature a distinction is often made between reflection and critical reflection (Fook 2012; White, Fook &

Gardner 2006) with the critical component comprising an approach which includes the disruption of assumptions arising from societal and cultural power structures (Fook 2012 p47). Fook (2012) suggests that without this critical approach, reflection can merely maintain the status quo of power relations so that one is reflecting within existing structures and dominant ideologies rather than questioning the impact of such structures. This interpretation of critical reflection is considered as developing from a tradition of critical theory (Brookfield 2009).

When the term 'critical reflection' is used in the philosophy literature as a component of the hierarchical interpretation of autonomy, there is little indication that it encompasses this structural disruptive approach. In Frankfurt (1971), Dworkin (1988), Taylor (2005) and Sneddon (2013) the term 'reflection' is used interchangeably with 'critical reflection' with no distinction being made between the two. The use of 'critical' in this context may merely be used for emphasis, or, to use Brookfield's (2009 p297) term as a "qualifier" to indicate reflection happening at a "deeper and more profound level".

Bloser et al. (2010 p240) address the notion of critical reflection as a central concept of autonomy and define it as a mechanism of distancing oneself or stepping back "from the attitude in question and to consider it in light of other attitudes or from a normative or evaluative perspective". This does not preclude a structural disruptive component to critical reflection but it does not explicitly include it either. Sneddon (2013 p8) defines reflection in autonomy as "thinking about one's own thoughts". Inherent in this concept is what he terms "self-knowing" and "self-shaping" (2013 p49). He perceives this as necessary in order for one to know one's own thoughts and be autonomous in one's individual choices and in the way in which one chooses to live one's life.

Self-knowing and self-shaping are relevant to social work as can be seen in consideration of the self in social work including in professional frameworks. The

Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) in England includes in its domain of “Values” the need for those entering the profession to be able to “recognise the impact their own values and attitudes can have on relationships with others”. This requires the ability to “self-know” and as a consequence to “self-shape”.

How then can this hierarchical concept of autonomy be a useful way of understanding the thesis research? The notion that reflection is the essence of autonomy is something that is rarely incorporated in discussions about social work professional judgement or its development. As discussed in Chapter 4, the research participants experienced professional judgement as a deliberative process. Using this hierarchical concept of autonomy, the deliberative process can be understood not merely as a mechanism by which the person reaches an act of autonomous professional judgement but that the deliberation itself is a core component of the act of being autonomous. In the act of self-shaping and self-knowing one can both *become* autonomous and *identify* oneself as autonomous. This ability to recognise oneself as autonomous is something that Sneddon (2013) suggests is fundamental to being autonomous. The domain of professional responsibility discussed in Chapter 4 does not just incorporate the participants having responsibility but also the cognisance of themselves owning that responsibility as a social work professional. It was often the act of knowing that they had responsibility or ownership that appeared pivotal to their development. This is illustrated in the data extracts as discussed **(4:3:1)**. Phrases that were used include “knowing it was your name on the report”; “knowing...the buck stopped with you”; “believing in the authority of the role” and “realising” that it was your judgement to make. This realisation of ownership can be seen as a necessary component of developing an autonomously responsible identity.

The learner agency domain also has relevance to hierarchical notions of autonomy. This is found in the participants’ recognition of themselves as needing to learn and on their reflection upon what they might do to further that learning. Data extracts

presented (4:3:3) contain elements of the participants knowing that that they needed to achieve or change something (self-knowing) as well as problem-solve a way in which they could effect this change (self-shaping). An example presented in Chapter 4 (4:3:3) is **A** realising he lacked the skills in presenting at a multi-disciplinary meeting so working out how he could develop these skills from his observation of others. Another example is **D** realising that her approach with a foster carer was not working so asking her supervisor to observe what she was doing in order to learn from feedback. There is also mention in the data of the benefit of a reflective “space” or “time” to achieve this self-knowing and self-shaping. This resonates with Sneddon’s notion of the need to recognise oneself as autonomous through self-reflection. The participants displayed awareness that it was within their power to effect change in themselves and in doing so were demonstrating themselves to be autonomous individuals.

### **5.2.2 Relational autonomy**

As stated previously, there are not only debates regarding different conceptualisations of autonomy but whether autonomy is desirable at all (Conly 2012). O’Shea (2012 p3) discusses critics of autonomy and categorises those who are either “revolutionary” or those who are “revisionary”. He cites feminist approaches toward autonomy as illustrative of both of these positions. Referring to Hoagland (1988) as an example, he categorises those with revolutionary approaches as considering the idea of autonomy “a flawed concept” (O’Shea 2012 p3) and anathema to the benefits of community and society due to its atomised, individualistic focus. Revisionists he categorises as those who believe in the potential of autonomy to forward a feminist ideal but see that the way it has been conceptualised is flawed. He quotes Brown (1995) as saying “the putative autonomy of the liberal subject partakes of a myth of masculinity requiring disavowal of dependency, the disavowal of relations that nourish and sustain the subject” (cited in O’Shea 2013 p19). The revisionists approach to the concept of

autonomy, including Brown's (1995), suggests it can and should be reconceptualised with notions of connectedness rather than atomisation at its heart. The idea of collectivism rather than individual liberalism as a foundation for autonomy was introduced by Nedelsky (1989) and developed by Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000) to form the basis of their theory of relational autonomy. It is primarily to the work of Nedelsky and Mackenzie and Stoljar that I turn to make the case for a related autonomy being relevant to the themes of this thesis.

Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000 p3) sum up the feminist critique of autonomy in the following way

“the charge is that the concept of autonomy is inherently masculinist, that it is inextricably bound up with masculine character ideals, with assumptions about selfhood and agency that are metaphysically, epistemologically, and ethically problematic from a feminist perspective, and with political traditions that historically have been hostile to women's interests and freedom. What lies at the heart of these charges is the conviction that the notion of individual autonomy is fundamentally individualistic and rationalistic”

Mackenzie & Stoljar (2000) value these critiques for bringing attention to the deficits in the way autonomy has been conceptualised but challenge the idea that it should amount to a rejection of autonomy itself. Their view is that autonomy is “vital” to understanding “oppression, subjection, and agency” (p3). Similarly Nedelsky (1989 p8) highlighted the importance to feminism of autonomy as a value because a central concern of feminism is to “shape our own lives, to define who we (each) are” and reject being defined by others.

Nedelsky's and Mackenzie & Stoljar's central premise is that the misconception in traditional theories of autonomy is that human interconnection is framed as a possible threat or interference to autonomy rather than as a necessary and constructive constituent part of it. Nedelsky (1989 p9) makes the point that “there are no human

beings in the absence of relations with others. We take our being in part from those relations". Developing this point, Mackenzie & Stoljar (2000 p4) state that "persons are socially embedded and that agents' identities are formed within the context of social relationships and shaped by a complex of intersecting social determinants". The point they make is that the role of others is not merely to be either permissive or obstructive to autonomous acts but is a fundamental element of the continuous development of an autonomous individual. Nedelsky (1989 p12) encapsulates this in her statement that "relatedness" should not be seen as "the antithesis of autonomy, but a literal precondition of autonomy, and interdependence a constant component of autonomy". Mackenzie & Stoljar (2000) coined the term relational autonomy as a means of conceptualising this interdependence. This dual notion of relatedness is at the heart of the theory of relational autonomy put forward by Mackenzie & Stoljar (2000). Firstly that social relationships and interdependence contribute to the development of autonomy and secondly that individuals are shaped by a socially and culturally constructed world and this has an impact on approaches toward autonomy. Returning to the discussion on critical reflection in the previous section **(5:2:1)**, a conceptualisation of autonomy as relational could shift the central notion of reflection toward a definition of critical reflection closer to that put forward by Brookfield (2009). This is because within a relational based autonomy appreciation of what it is to be autonomous acknowledges that "self-shaping" (Sneddon 2013) takes place in a socially and culturally constructed context.

Understanding autonomy as relational helps to explain the themes of this research in several ways. The most obvious is in relation to the domain of facilitating the professional voice but it is also evident in the theme of learner agency. Nedelsky (1989 p11-12) conceptualises relationships as "enabling" autonomy and as nurturing the "capacity" to become autonomous. As discussed in Chapter 4 **(4:3:2)** the facilitative approach and reassurance of others, particularly the PE, was key to the participants'

development of professional judgement skills. The data extracts provided to illustrate learner agency (**4:3:3**), demonstrate how the participants actively ‘used’ or ‘drew upon’ others to develop their expertise. The importance of this did not only lie in facilitating the participants’ judgement in one particular scenario but the approach enabled their capacity for increased confidence and self-efficacy in subsequent situations. An illustrative example is the extract from **C** as she identifies a transition between using discussions with others in order to emulate their judgements to using discussions with others in order to inform her own judgement.

**C** I was thinking about how do you learn how to make decisions, and I think for the beginning bit at the placement what I was trying to do was second guess other people’s decisions...people that I thought were good at their job, you know like my practice educator or other people in the team... I think it was just gradually my confidence that builds up from definitely the mid-way point onwards, where I realised when I was having conversations with people I realised I wasn’t thinking about, ‘Oh what do they think about this case’. I was just having conversations with them because, well I don’t know you are still thinking, you are still aware, it’s still helpful having those conversations you are not ignoring what people are saying, but I wasn’t using it so much to guide me as to just help me think about a case so I could come to my own decisions.

This could be seen as illustrative of Nedelsky’s (1989 p12) assertion that relationships are both a “pre-condition of autonomy” as well as a “constant component of autonomy”.

**C** reveals the value of relationship in her journey to becoming autonomous in her judgements but also acknowledges that discussions with others have ongoing benefits for the formation of her own judgement and thus are a valuable “constant component of autonomy”.

The data from this research indicate that relationships and interactions with others were an indispensable component of the development of the participants’ autonomy. This further validates the case for autonomy as being relational and highlights the positivity of interdependence. It also strengthens the case for relational autonomy



being a useful lens through which to understand the research. It should be acknowledged that, as with the ideas discussed in the section above, this concept of relational autonomy was not developed with professional autonomy in mind. I would argue, however, that by using examples from the data, I have demonstrated the relevance of this to the development of professional autonomy. Similarly, MacDonald (2002) argues the case for relational autonomy as a means to understand the implications of professional autonomy for nurses and student nurses.

A relationship-based approach to social work is not new and is advocated by some as a necessary counter to the neo-liberal and managerial framework within the UK (Howe 1998; Ruch 2010; Meagle 2015). Whilst no definition is agreed upon (Ruch 2010; Meagle 2015) it is accepted that the foundations of a relationship-based approach is based on acknowledging that relationship is at the heart of social work practice. There is therefore a need to understand and attend to the psycho-social underpinnings of relationship. Relational autonomy explicitly counters the notion of a neo-liberalism ideology of autonomy and reclaims the inter-relational basis of autonomous acts and autonomous being. Yet it has not thus far been brought into the discussion on relationship-based practice. I do not see relational autonomy as an alternative concept to a relationship-based approach but would argue for it providing a useful added dimension to the foregrounding of the importance of relationship in social work and in social work education.

The review of the literature on social work professional judgement identified the importance of interaction with others. This provides further evidence for the importance of autonomy conceptualised as relational. Most research into social work professional judgement is not designed in such a way that begins from a premise of this professional judgement being interactive or inter-relational. This may be because the

concept of autonomy as used in statements such as that in the HCPC Standards of Proficiency is not understood as being relational.

### **5.3 Psychology and autonomy: Autonomy support**

Self-determination theory (SDT) was developed by psychologists Deci & Ryan (1985). It is concerned with human motivation and contends that intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation is the greater promoter of growth and development, particularly in learning. It is based on the idea that human beings have a natural tendency toward “active engagement and development” (Ryan and Deci 2002 p5) but that environmental impact has a role to play in determining whether this tendency is enabled to flourish or not. Ryan & Deci claim that SDT integrates a behavioural perspective with a humanistic and developmental perspective. This is because the theory accepts there is evidence for an innate human tendency to motivation whilst acknowledging this tendency “cannot be taken for granted” due to the influence of “socio-contextual factors” (Ryan & Deci 2002 p5). They consider universal “basic psychological needs” to be competence, relatedness and autonomy (Ryan & Deci 2002 p7-8) and that optimal development is achieved when motivation to meet these basic needs is capitalised upon. One of the ways of capitalising on this in relation to learning is for teachers to be autonomy supportive. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide an in-depth appraisal of SDT, the concept of autonomy support I believe to be highly relevant so it is this that I shall focus on.

Reeve (2002 p183), drawing upon decades of empirical research in SDT, presents the following conclusions. “Autonomously-motivated students thrive in educational settings” and “students benefit when teachers support their autonomy”. Reeve (1998 p312) described autonomy support in the following way

“Autonomy supportive teachers generally encourage students to pursue self-determined agendas and then support students’ initiatives and intrinsic motivation. This approach is autonomy supportive because the teachers’ goal is to strengthen the students’ self-regulation”

In a previous journal article (Rawles 2016) I discussed the theory of autonomy support as a way of interpreting the findings of my exploratory study. I had recognised that the way in which PEs responded to students’ self-doubt, following their independent practice interventions, had an impact on the student’s self-efficacy during subsequent professional judgement. I presented what was taking place for the student as a three stage process.

1. Autonomous act of professional judgement
  2. Reflection causing self-doubt
  3. Validation of act of professional judgement by significant other
- (Rawles 2016 p117)

This then led to a final stage of greater “self-regulation” (Reeve 1998 p312) realised in the student being able to perform an autonomous act of professional judgement with a decrease in self-doubt.

The findings of this thesis research provide further evidence of the positive impact of autonomy supportive approaches. This is demonstrated mainly in the domain of facilitation of the professional voice. I previously discussed this domain **(4:3:2)** by presenting the two elements of ‘active facilitation’ and ‘responsive facilitation’. Both of these can be seen as autonomy-supportive. Encouraging students to “pursue self-determined agendas” (Reeve 1998 p312) is what practice educators and others are doing when they are actively facilitating the student. An example of this is the interaction between participant **J** and her practice educator who uses the phrase “don’t whiteboard me” to encourage her to always develop her own hypothesis first before consulting him. There are further such examples presented **(4:3:2)**. Supporting

students' "initiative and intrinsic motivation" (Reeve 1998 p312) can be seen in the examples illustrating what I termed 'responsive facilitation' **(4:3:2)**. The examples followed a similar pattern as the three stage process discussed above in which a reassurance and valuing of the students professional judgement led to greater confidence in themselves as an autonomous professional. In Chapter 4 **(4:2:2)** I discussed 'unexpected event' critical incidents. In narrating these incidents, the participants always included in the narration what happened subsequent to the event itself. This comprised of their reflection about their decisions and, nearly always, their discussion about it with their PE which led to increased self-belief. This is indication that it was the entire sequence in this three stage process that contributed to the learning for the student and that sequence included the important element of support for their autonomy.

The conclusion of Reeve's (1998 p312) statement in the quotation above is that "the teachers' goal is to strengthen the students' self-regulation". It should be noted that I have no indication that the 'teachers' in this instance explicitly perceived their goal as this or even understood it specifically in terms of supporting autonomy. It may have been that the PEs who engaged in this autonomy supportive approach did so because they identified in this some useful and necessary skill for social work, namely the development of expertise in one's own professional judgement and opinion.

Autonomy support and relational autonomy have some obvious links. They both foreground the importance of others in developing autonomy and have the concept of relatedness at their core. The value of relational autonomy to the thesis research is that it understands relatedness and interdependence as a fundamental part of the essence of autonomy whereas autonomy support places relatedness and autonomy as separate psychological needs. The value of autonomy support, on the other hand, is that it has a focus on the explicit, intentional enablement of autonomy and this is suited

to exploring professional learning and consequently social work education. An adoption of an explicit autonomy supportive approach to social work education could be beneficial in enhancing the development of skills for professional judgement.

## **5.4 Learning theory and autonomy**

The components of autonomy discussed so far are reflection, relational autonomy and autonomy support. All these components are in some way encompassed within the umbrella term of autonomy as it is discussed in learning theory. Boud (1988 p17) makes the point that autonomy in learning relates to three different “groups of educational ideas”. Firstly, autonomy is considered as “a goal of education” whereby it is the aim of education to develop the autonomy of individuals. This has resonance with Mezirow’s (1981) work on transformative learning in which he considers that during learning we alter “problematic frames of reference” (Mezirow 2009 p92) by critically assessing internalised assumptions about our roles. Mezirow links this with building competence and self-confidence and that self-directed learning is at the route of this.

The second group of educational ideas referred to by Boud (1988) is that autonomy is an approach to educational practice that involves employing teaching and learning methods, such as problem based learning, requiring the student to be self-directed. This is exemplified by Knowles et al.’s (2015) andragogical process model in which self-directed techniques are employed to suit what are considered to be the needs of adult learners. This type of approach has been criticised by Collins (1996) on the basis that it purports to adhere to a humanistic tradition of learning but instead he considers it technisist and prescriptive as it upholds a pre-defined agency agenda of how learning

should take place. The third group of ideas is that autonomy is integral to all learning because learners have to act autonomously on some level in order to engage in learning. For example they have to engage in reading or writing an essay.

Rather than separate educational ideas relating to autonomy it is the interplay of all three of these ideas presented by Boud that is the essence of autonomy in learning. This is borne out by the findings of this thesis research. The professional autonomy of the participants had increased through their educational journey (goal of education). This increase was achieved through a combination of them having agency in their learning (autonomy integral to learning) and the strategies of others to facilitate this autonomy (educational practices). This mirrors the interrelation of the three domains of this thesis research.

The theories of both Brookfield and Eraut also have relevance to the findings of this research with regard to autonomy in learning, although neither extensively uses the term 'autonomy' itself. Brookfield (2001) draws on his own research and that of others to consider adult self-directed learning. He uses Witkin's (1949; 1950) concept of 'field-independent' and 'field-dependent' learners (Brookfield 2001 p41). He states that field-independent learners are characterised as being "socially independent, individualistic (and) inner-directed" and that the prevailing view is that this signifies a learner who is better adapted and more autonomous due to their "single-minded pursuit of specified learning goals" (p42). He argues, however, that conversely his research demonstrates the valuable critical reflective capacities of field-dependent learners because of their skills at contextualising and showing an awareness of the "contingency of knowledge" (Brookfield 2001 p42). This resonates with the challenge to traditional notions of autonomy posed by relational autonomy by highlighting the influence of context. Dependence, or more appropriately interdependence in

Brookfield's theory is considered a strength rather than a weakness or a failing, as is the case in relational autonomy. Brookfield (2001 p44) states:

“Successful self-directed learners appear to be highly aware of context in the sense of placing their learning within a social setting, in which advice, information and the skill modelling provided by other learners are crucial conditions for self-directed learning”

This resonates with the learner agency domain of this thesis research in the use the participants made use of others to develop their learning and expertise. The literature review on social work professional judgement **(2:3)** also indicates the importance of interpreting context as a facet of skilled sense-making by social workers.

Brookfield's reference to the “contingency of knowledge” (Brookfield 2001 p42) has resonance with Eraut's conceptualisation of the use of knowledge in practice. As discussed **(2:7:2)** Eraut (1994 p20) concludes from his research that theory and practice have a “symbiotic relationship”. Rather than understanding knowledge to be directly transferred in a linear way he contends that knowledge is reinterpreted in use. He states that knowledge “may need to be used before it can acquire any significant meaning for the user” (1994 p33). This was evident in the thesis research findings and discussed particularly in relation to the learner agency domain **(4:3:3)** where participants made linked knowledge to developing their professional judgement. This requires an autonomous approach to learning.

The literature reviewed in relation to professional learning **(2:7:2)** indicates the benefit in autonomy in learning particularly in the benefit to be found in the challenge of the work itself. Cheetham & Chivers (2001) make direct reference to feedback from participants about the value to learning of autonomy in practice. They highlight that learning was seen as being achieved through a balance of support and “being allowed

to try things on your own without 'someone breathing down your neck'" (2001 p274). This support/autonomy balance can be seen throughout the data of the research for this thesis.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

After presenting the three domains and themes in the previous chapter, in this chapter I introduced and discussed theoretical concepts of autonomy from philosophy, psychology and learning theory. Following an explanation and critique of these theories I demonstrated their relevance to the research findings by drawing on examples from the data. My argument is that all the three domains are rooted in ideas of autonomy and by understanding the different meanings of autonomy we can appreciate what is taking place for the students as they developed into professionals with increased autonomous capacity. A key point was that becoming autonomous and understanding oneself to be autonomous appears significant in fuelling the self-efficacy necessary for the development of skills for professional judgement. Another important point is the relational aspect of autonomy and the findings indicate that the participants' autonomous development was inextricably linked to their relatedness to others.



# 6 Conclusion

## 6.1 Introduction

The intention of this thesis has been to address two interrelated questions:

- How do social work students develop skills for professional judgement?
- What enables, facilitates and enhances this development?

I chose to answer these questions by undertaking a hermeneutic phenomenological research study which was influenced by principles of authentic professional learning, appreciative inquiry and practice-based research. The participants were 14 students who were at the point of graduating from an MSc Social Work programme at a university in England. I hoped to learn from the participants by positioning them as experts of their own experience and as a valuable resource to inform social work education. I carried out semi-structured interviews that were constructed around critical incidents of learning in placement. I subsequently met with 7 of the participants in a focus group so that they could contribute to the interpretation of the findings. I analysed the data thematically in order to understand the phenomenological essence of what had characterised the development of skills for professional judgement for these participants. I presented these findings as a conceptual model of three domains: professional responsibility, facilitation of the professional voice and learner agency.

In the remainder of the chapter I will outline the key messages from this research before discussing the implications for practice and the challenges from practice. I will discuss the contribution to knowledge that this thesis offers and future potential

avenues for research. I will comment on the limitations before concluding with some thoughts about my own learning journey.

## **6.2 Key Messages**

Key messages from this thesis come from the literature review, the research findings and from my reappraisal of conceptualisations of autonomy. I will present each in turn.

### ***6.2.1 Social workers and professional judgement: a skilled approach to complexity***

Having carried out a review of the literature, updated from my CAS, I concluded that there remains a lack of research into how social work students develop the skills necessary for professional judgement. I found there to be an increase in empirical research into how social workers formulate professional judgement or decision making in practice. A synthesised review of this research substantiated the claim that social work professional judgement is complex. This is due to dynamic circumstances, unknowns and the “unique and distinctive” (Regehr et al. 2015 p296) factors that characterise human relations and human situations. As such, social work professional judgement requires more than the application of actuarial processes. It requires social workers to have a skilled approach to the complexity of practice.

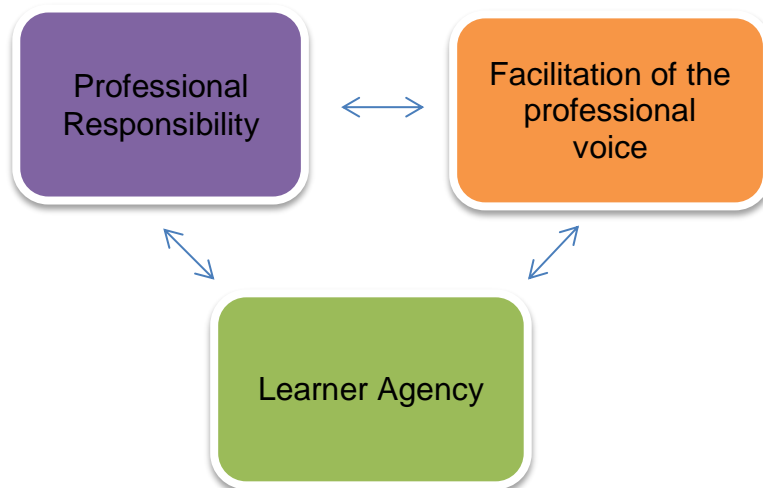
The findings of the literature review indicate that social workers are using their skills to navigate this complexity by interpreting and reinterpreting the dynamic context of practice. They are skilfully managing uncertainty and are interacting with others with intentionality. All the reviewed research that was based on observing real-world professional judgement highlighted interaction with others as an important component. A key finding of the literature review is that the ‘sense-making’ required for social work professional judgement is not usually an “individual activity” (Helm 2017 p27).

Given the skill required for social work professional judgement, it is important for those of us in social work education to understand how to enable students to begin to develop these skills. It is therefore also important that we develop an evidence base that informs of the best way to do this.

### ***6.2.2 The authentic professional learning of the participants: Responsibility, facilitation and agency***

Authentic professional learning (APL) describes the holistic ‘lived-experience’ of learning for professionals in the workplace (Webster-Wright 2009 p715). Through my research I sought to understand the APL of the participants with regard to developing skills for professional judgement. I found that this learning was characterised by the presence and interaction of three key domains (**Fig 6:1**)

**Figure 6:1 Developing skills for social work professional judgement: Three domains**



In Chapter 4 I discussed each domain in depth and explored its associated themes. In summary, learning occurred as a consequence of the following:

- Having responsibility for practice and for professional judgement about that practice. Realising that you are a professional with authority.
- Being encouraged and positively challenged, within a nurturing environment, to arrive at and exercise professional judgement and articulate the reasoning behind it. To have that professional judgement valued and validated.
- Engaging actively with people and opportunities in order to learn and develop as well as connecting experiences of learning within and between environments.

A key finding was that interaction with others was an important enabler of learning just as it was an important enabler of professional judgement in practice as identified in the literature review and discussed above **(6.2.1)**

Research provides evidence of the importance of self-efficacy to professional learning (Cheetham & Chivers 2001, Eraut 2004a). My research similarly indicates this to be the case. What it also indicates is that the presence and interaction of the three elements, as described above, helped to increase self-efficacy which in turn enabled the participants to increase their skills in formulating, articulating and scrutinising their professional judgement.

The theoretical conceptualisation of professional learning that most closely resonates with my findings is Eraut's (2004a; 2007) triangle model of factors affecting learning at work **(2.7.2)**. Eraut concludes that 'challenge', 'support' and 'confidence' operate in a triangular relationship to give rise to learning at work. He states:

Confidence arose from successfully meeting *challenges* in one's work, while the confidence to take on such challenges depended on the extent to which learners felt *supported* in that behaviour... If there is neither a challenge nor sufficient support to encourage a person to seek out or respond to a challenge, then confidence declines and with it the motivation to learn. Eraut (2004a p269)

The interdependent and iterative nature of 'challenge', 'support' and 'confidence' also reflects the experiences of the participants in my study. My research, therefore, indicates the applicability of Eraut's conceptualisation to placement learning in social work. Despite the students being on practice placement as part of a formal learning programme, it would seem that factors found to be important to informal workplace learning remain highly relevant. The research for my thesis additionally provides insights more specifically into what it is about these factors that give rise to and enable the development of the skills required for professional judgement in social work. They also highlight role of the students themselves in what they bring to the endeavour in contributing to this interdependent and iterative learning process.

### ***6.2.3 The case for re-appraising autonomy as relational***

The concept of autonomy has relevance to both professional judgement and professional learning. I identified that the findings of my research were rooted in ideas of autonomy. In Chapter 5 I explored conceptualisations of autonomy (5.2.2). I argued that common misconceptions about autonomy overlook that interdependence and relatedness are at its core as both "precondition" and "constant component" (Nedelsky 1989 p12). In the literature review I found that interaction with others was often a "constant component" of professional judgement. In the research I found that interaction with others was a "precondition" of developing skills in professional judgement. Understood in this way interdependence can be seen to be at the heart of becoming and being an autonomous professional. This runs counter to traditional views that understand the influence of others to be obstructive to autonomy. This not only has implications about how professional judgement is practiced and learned, but could

also have implications as to how the assessment of decision making and professional judgement performance in social work is researched. An endeavour to get as close as possible to gold standard conditions of research, by eliminating influence, may be at the sacrifice of the 'utility' (Pawson et al. 2003) of the research if we understand interaction to be at the core of professional judgement.

### **6.3 Contribution to knowledge**

As discussed, there is a lack of research into how social work students develop skills for professional judgement. This thesis contributes to knowledge by beginning to address this. Conceptualising the findings into three domains of professional responsibility, facilitation of the professional voice and learner agency provide an original perspective on social work student professional learning generally and more specifically learning associated with professional judgement. Within this overall finding, the importance of responsibility as a facilitator of learning is rarely found within existing research on social work student professional learning and there is limited focus on social work student as a vehicle for this learning between practice and academia. Whilst the importance of practice educators is well discussed in the literature, this research provides an insight into the actual approach and technique of practice educators and the impact this has for students.

The importance of self-efficacy to professional learning is well documented (Cheetham & Chivers 2001; Eraut 2004a). This research contributes by providing further insight into what enables an increase in self-efficacy for social work students during placement learning. The role of interaction in both professional judgement and professional learning, though not a new concept, is brought together here in a new way in order to understand the experiences of social work students.

Autonomy is mentioned within the social work literature and within social work professional frameworks, however, the re-appraisal of the meaning of autonomy in order to better understand social work professional judgement contributes to knowledge in an original way. Particularly relevant is the notion of relational autonomy. Understanding both professional judgement and professional learning in terms of relational autonomy illuminates and appreciates the importance of interdependence and interaction within both spheres.

Applying Webster-Wright's (2009) concept of Authentic Professional Learning to the research of social work learners was a new approach for me and my search of the literature indicates this to be a new approach to social work education research. By not framing this as an evaluation study I was able to understand the holism of learning and what was important about this learning to the students themselves

The combining of Authentic Professional Learning, Appreciative Inquiry and practice-based research as a framework of influence for the research as discussed (3.4) was an original approach that proved highly effective for this piece of research.

## **6.4 Educating for professional judgement: implications for practice**

Practice-based research (3.4.3) is all about researching practice in order to make a difference in practice (Epstein 2001). Whilst I understand that sharing findings with the academic community can indirectly bring benefits to practice, it was important to me to also have the opportunity to positively impact those directly involved in practice, namely, social work students and practice educators. A further important indirect sphere of influence that I was aware of throughout the research is the impact on people

who use social work services who I hope will benefit from the enhanced skill of social work students and practice educators.

#### **6.4.1 Social work students**

So how do we educate for social work professional judgement? This research indicates that an autonomy-supportive **(5.3)** approach to educating social work students would be beneficial, as long as it is based on a conceptualisation of autonomy as deliberative, reflective and, most importantly, relational. This could involve a greater emphasis on inquiry and problem-based learning methodologies that are now common to social work teaching in the UK. It could however, also involve enabling social work students to understand what it means to be autonomous, in learning, in social work and in professional judgement. The domains of 'professional responsibility' and 'learning agency' would particularly indicate the benefits to professional development of the highly active approach taken by the students in this study. Influenced by my research I am currently involved in overhauling the social work programmes in the university where I work so that, when revalidated, they are explicitly underpinned by autonomy-supportive, enquiry-based principles.

#### **6.4.2 Practice educators**

Given the pivotal role of 'facilitation of the professional voice', the findings of this research are highly relevant to practice educators. As one research participant said, it was because of the skill of those who supervised him that he was facilitated to develop his professional judgement. What the research participants found most useful was the skilled way in which practice educators enabled them to arrive at and scrutinise their professional judgement and this was most effective when embedded in a supportive and nurturing relationship. In this study, it was clear that practice educators had a profound impact on the way in which these future social workers managed professional



judgement and by the skill with which many achieved this. Being a social work practice educator is a highly skilled educative role. They are pivotal to educating for professional judgement and their own learning as practice educators needs to reflect this.

Throughout the latter part of my professional doctorate I have shared my research with practice educators at conferences and have been invited to do so as part of their practice education qualification. I have translated the domains from the findings into messages for practice educators and ask them to consider this in the context of their own work. These are as follows:

#### Professional Responsibility

- Provide opportunities where students are responsible
- Help student understand themselves as a responsible professional

#### Facilitating the Professional Voice

- Put students into situations where they have to come up with their own professional opinion. Either through practice requirements or your own teaching and learning strategies
- Explicitly value that they have offered their professional judgement and views

#### Learner Agency

- Do not stifle their own pursuit of expertise development whatever form this takes
- If they struggle to be proactive in this develop a culture of asking what they have learned from experiences or what they might do to maximise their learning in each situation

Practice educators share examples of practice strategies they will engage in as a consequence of this research. Two recent examples are: “We will make sure the student is recorded as the lead worker and encourage others to initially go to the student when they have queries about the case rather than coming directly to us”; “I will make a point of more often giving informal positive feedback when the student volunteers their ideas rather than wait for discussions in supervision and I will tell the

student when others have said something positive about them". There is the potential to further embed ideas arising from the findings of this research into the education of practice educators.

## **6.5 Dissemination and further research**

I have shared various aspects of this research and earlier doctoral work at several international social work conferences and within an article (Rawles 2016) for a U.S. social work education journal. I have plans for several further journal articles on the research findings and in relation to conceptualisations of autonomy.

There is a paucity of research into how learning for professional judgement occurs in social work and, more generally, what gives rise to learning for social work students and therefore there are several potential avenues of research to pursue.

The limited research in this specific area means that it would be valuable to find out whether similar themes exist nationally and internationally in order to understand the extent to which these findings can inform and contribute to the development of social work education. Another approach would be to use the conceptual model of the three domains and explicitly incorporate them into practice educator and/or student curricula in order to evaluate the impact and outcome of this. Having experienced some limited collaboration with students in this study I am keen to take a more embedded approach to collaboration with students and/or practice educators to further research. Additionally the involvement of service users in research and their input into a useful focus for research would be a productive avenue to pursue.

As I will discuss in relation to limitations, this research did not seek to explore the impact of individual differences on the development of skills for professional judgement or on what would enhance those skills. Given the literature review indicated differences in social workers approach, particularly to managing uncertainty, and given the importance of self-efficacy, research on the influences of different cultural, life and work experiences could be an important avenue to pursue.

One interesting finding, as I have discussed, was that the graduating students in my study appeared very different in terms of levels of expertise from the findings about graduating social work students in the study conducted by Fook et al. (1997, 2000). The participants in my study appeared much more contextually aware and their narrations indicated a greater level of skilled practice. There is not sufficient evidence to draw any meaningful conclusions from this but it may be useful to pursue this further with a larger piece of research.

## **6.6 Challenges to autonomous professional judgement**

### ***6.6.1 Objective/subjective decision making***

The findings of both the literature review and empirical research for this study indicate the importance of the “situated judgement of professionals” (Polkinghorne 2004). This suggests an expertise approach rather than an actuarial approach to decision making which risks inconsistency in professional judgement and the potential of being subject to decision traps. I suggest that continually striving for a pure actuarial approach is a false premise given that, as has been seen in the literature, professional judgement is complex and requires situational interpretation and reinterpretation. I would suggest that to counter the potential of bias arising from heuristics, social work students need to

develop a critically reflective approach to these situated judgements. The approach of some of the practice educators was to positively challenge the students to explore and scrutinise the basis and the reason for their professional judgement. It may be that greater focus on the skills to do this within practice educator programmes would ultimately enhance a critically questioning approach from social work students. The literature on tools and frameworks for decision making (2.4) indicated that frameworks that worked with the situated judgement of social workers to support their judgement were seen as useful. This may be a positive aid to the social workers' skilled approach.

### ***6.6.2 The context of social work in England***

I began this thesis by discussing the impact of the managerialist, neo-liberal context of social work in the UK and its perceived impact on the autonomy of the professional. Understanding how the skills for professional judgement are developed does not change this context, at least in the short term. However, this research counters the views of those I have encountered in past and present practice who claim that social workers can no longer exercise their professional judgement as the participants, despite still being students, gave numerous examples of where they had done this. Firstly, if we understand professional judgement to be relational this shifts the focus away from understanding the effective exercise of autonomous professional judgement only to be when an individual decides alone. Secondly I would argue that the presence of a prescriptive neo-liberal managerial framework to public services means there more not less need for skills in autonomous professional judgement. To have confidence to exercise professional judgement on behalf of the well-being of service users social workers need to recognise and understand themselves to be autonomous professionals. This can be more challenging, but more necessary within a managerial

and neo-liberal framework and culture. It also requires greater opportunities for support and time, space and facilitation for reflection which is genuinely critical.

## **6.7 Limitations**

This study was small scale and qualitative and as such cannot be considered to be, nor is intended to be, representative.

As discussed **(6.5)** it was not the intention of this study to understand the differences between students in their learning but rather the essence of the phenomenon of this learning across a group of students. I also acknowledged that given the participants were from a cohort of students undertaking a Masters qualification, they were older and more experienced than most social work students in the England. This has implications in terms of age, experience (life and work), disability, cultural and gender, particularly where such factors can affect self-efficacy which was found to be pivotal to professional learning. The impact of this is likely to be most apparent in relation to the research finding that learner agency is a component of successful learning. In addition an Appreciative Inquiry approach considers when things have worked rather than when things have not and whilst this has proven valuable to reveal the often hidden positive experience and practice of social work education it does not research where students and/or educators struggle.

As stated, this research was not intended to evaluate or assess the participants' decision-making abilities and it had benefits in not attempting to do so. It does mean, however, that appreciating what has worked in the development of skills for professional judgement does not extend to knowing that this has worked in practice with service users. If my research were to be considered a mechanism for evaluating

social work education it would only reach level 2b in Carpenter's (2005 p6) evaluation of outcomes for social work education (**table 6:1**)

**Table 6:1 Levels of Outcomes of Educational Programmes**

(After Kirkpatrick, 1967 and Barr et al., 2000)

Level	
1	Learners' reactions
2a	Modification in attitude and perceptions
2b	Acquisition of knowledge and skills
3	Changes in behaviour
4a	Changes in organisational practice
4b	Benefits to users and carers

I have discussed in depth throughout the thesis about my reasons for structuring the research in the way that I did. Going forward however, it would be useful to establish a way of research that seeks to understand the impact of behavioural and organisational change and benefits to service users. The findings from this thesis research could provide a foundation for considering how that might happen.

Though not a specific limitation, I may reconsider the use of a specific Critical Incident Technique in the future. The benefit of this was that the focus of the interviews remained grounded in lived-experience which I would maintain as a focus of future similar work. However, the potential for rigidity and the over-emphasis of an individual event has potential to be constraining. I overcame this by conceptualising experiences as 'linked-critical incident' which enabled me to consider the breadth of the learning experiences.

Involving the students in the interpretation of the data was a very positive and productive experience. I did not feel, however, that I made the most of this opportunity

and in future would be 'bolder' and plan for greater involvement throughout different phases of the research.

## **6.8 My learning journey**

It took me a while before I appreciated the extent to which my Doctoral journey had been punctuated by critical incidents of learning. The irony of this is not lost on me.

As with the experiences of my research participants, however, these were rarely single isolated incidents. They were more often a moment of realisation triggered by, for example, reading, discussing, listening to a conference presentation or a few words from my supervisor. These 'lightbulb' moments often propelled me in new and interesting directions. They were born out of my being able to suddenly 'join the dots' of different ideas. This was a process I could see that had occurred for the research participants. The simple question "what do you think?" asked of them in placement was enough for many to set off a chain reaction of realisation about social work, about themselves as social workers and about their role in professional judgement. They were 'joining the dots'. It took me to recognise this in them before I recognised it in myself. In this Doctoral journey I have learned about learning and I have learned about being a researcher of learning. I am now eager to continue along this path and find more dots to join.

## 7 Appendices



## 7.1 Appendix 1: Table of studies i: How social workers enact professional judgement

Name, date, country	Title	Research method	Participants
Åström et al 2013 Sweden	Social workers' assessments of needs and interventions for adolescents with substance misuse problems, criminal behaviour and mental health difficulties: a vignette study	Quantitative Vignette	82 social workers working with young people with behavioural difficulties
Benbenishty et al 2015 Israel, The Netherlands, Northern Ireland & Spain	Decision making in child protection: An international comparative study on maltreatment substantiation, risk assessment and interventions recommendations, and the role of professionals' child welfare attitudes	Vignette	828 child protection social workers
Buckland 2016 England	The Decision by Approved Mental Health Professionals to Use Compulsory Powers under the Mental Health Act 1983: A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis	Semi-structured interviews	10 Approved Mental Health Practitioners who were all social workers
Enosh & Bayer-Topilsky 2015 Israel	Reasoning and Bias: Heuristics in Safety Assessment and Placement Decisions for Children at Risk	Quantitative vignette	105 child welfare case workers
Graham et al 2015 USA	The Decision Making Ecology of placing a child into foster care: A structural equation model	Quantitative survey plus the looking at administrative records of workers and clients	1130 child protection investigative workers
Hackett & Taylor 2014 UK	Decision Making in Social Work with Children and Families: The Use of Experiential and Analytical Cognitive Processes	Documentary analysis of core assessments and follow up interviews with the social workers who had completed them	50 social workers
Helm 2016 Scotland	Sense making in a social work office an ethnographic study of safeguarding judgements	Ethnographic – overt non participatory observations	27 social workers, senior social workers and social work assistants
Hyun & Adams 2016 South Korea USA	Comparative Study of Child Abuse Risk Assessment in the United States and Korea	Online survey with vignette plus follow up interviews	15 social workers from South Korea; 13 military social workers from USA
Keddell	Weighing it up: child and family discourses in	Interviews based on critical incident of	22 social workers and 15 other

2016 New Zealand	NGO child protection decision-making in Aotearoa/New Zealand	best practice	stakeholders
Kettle 2017 Scotland	The tipping point: Fateful moments in child protection	Interviews plus analysis of serious case reviews	22 social workers
O'Hare et al 2013 England, Scotland, Northern Ireland	Implementing mental health law: a comparison of social work practice across three jurisdictions	Survey using vignette plus open qualitative questions	13 experienced mental health social workers 7 social workers training for mental health practice 8 social work students
Regehr et al 2015 Canada	Suicide risk assessments: Examining influences on clinicians' professional judgment	Standardised patients performing scenarios. Questionnaires	34 experienced social workers 31 final year MSW students
Rodrigues et al 2015 Portugal	The decision of out-of-home placement in residential care after parental neglect Empirically testing a psychosocial model	Vignette study testing a psychosocial model	195 workers 30% of whom were social workers
Saltiel * same data set as below 2013 England	Understanding complexities in families lives: the usefulness of 'family practices' as an aid to decision-making	Ethnography - Interviews, observations	Two social work sites, one a local authority the other a voluntary organisation
Saltiel *same data set as above 2016 England	Observing frontline decision making in child protection	Ethnography - Interviews observations	Two social work sites, one a local authority the other a voluntary organisation
Spratt et al 2015 Northern Ireland	In and out of home care decisions: The influence of confirmation bias in developing decision supportive reasoning	2 part vignette and questionnaire	202 social workers
Stanley 2013 New Zealand	Our tariff will rise': Risk, probabilities and child protection Health, Risk & Society	Ethnography observations, interviews	70 child protection social workers
Wilkins 2015 England	Balancing Risk and Protective Factors: How Do Social Workers and Social Work Managers Analyse Referrals that May Indicate Children Are at Risk of Significant Harm	Semi-structured interviews based on 4 vignettes	13 social workers and 5 managers from a Referral and Assessment Team

## 7.2 Appendix 2: Table of studies ii: Social workers use of tools, frameworks and discretion

Name, date, country	Title	Method	Participants
Alfandari 2017 Israel	Systemic barriers to effective utilization of decision making tools in child protection practice	Observations and interviews	23 social workers
Evans 2013 England	Organisational rules and discretion in adult social work	Interviews (follow up study to a previous larger study)	8 social workers, 4 social work managers
Evans 2016 England	Street-level bureaucracy, management and the corrupted world of service	Interviews	10 social workers, 4 social work managers
Gillingham 2017 Australia	Decision making in child and family welfare the role of tools and practice frameworks in child protection	Semi-structured interviews based on vignette plus questions about decision making in practice	30 practitioners including social workers
Hoybye-Mortensen 2015 Denmark	Decision making tools and their influence on caseworkers room for discretion	Group interviews comparing use of three decision making tools	Social workers in child protection, nurses in older people's services
Scourfield 2015 England	Even further beyond street-level bureaucracy: The Dispersal of discretion exercised in decisions made in older people's care home reviews	Observations and interviews and documentary analysis	Two sites various stakeholders including social workers
Vaswani & Merone 2014 Scotland	Are there risks with risk assessment? A study of the predictive accuracy of the Youth Level of Service – Case Management Inventory with young offenders in Scotland	Secondary analysis of anonymised data of cases held by social workers	1138 cases over two years

### 7.3 Appendix 3: Table of studies iii: Research that included social work students

Name, date, country	Title	Method	Participants
Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty 2016 Israel	Child welfare attitudes, risk assessments and intervention recommendations: The role of professional expertise	Questionnaire asking for responses to a vignette	210 social workers and 263 social work students
Fleming et al 2015 England	Effects of professional experience on child maltreatment risk assessments: A comparison of students and qualified social workers	Vignettes	40 social workers 105 social work students
O'Hare et al 2013 England, Scotland, Northern Ireland	Implementing mental health law: a comparison of social work practice across three jurisdictions	Survey using vignette plus open qualitative questions	13 experienced mental health social workers 7 social workers training for mental health practice 8 social work students
Regehr et al 2015 Canada	Suicide risk assessments: Examining influences on clinicians' professional judgment	Standardised patients performing scenarios. Questionnaires	34 experienced social workers 31 final year MSW students

## 7.4 Appendix 4: Information sheet

### RESEARCH STUDY PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

*You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully*

#### **Study title**

#### **How do social work students develop professional judgement skills?**

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

The purpose of this study is to find out how social work students develop professional judgement skills during their practice placements and what helps this process. I consider the views of those who have undergone this process to be invaluable in contributing to our knowledge of how skills in professional judgement are developed. This knowledge can then be used to develop teaching for both students and practice educators. I also intend to draw upon it for publication and conference presentation in order to inform the wider social work and social work education community.

For the purpose of this research I have defined professional judgement in the following way

To draw a conclusion, make a decision, offer an opinion or recommend a course of action within a professional context as a social work student

#### **Why have I been invited to participate?**

You have been invited to participate in this study as you are soon to complete or have just completed the MSc Social Work course.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

No, it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. If, after you have participated in the research, you change your mind about wanting your contribution to be included, you can ask for this to be withdrawn up to the point at which it has been included in any written or verbal presentation.

#### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

You will be asked to take part in a 1 to 1 research interview with me lasting up to one hour. During the interview you will be asked to share examples from your placements that you consider were significant to the development of your professional judgement and you will be invited to share why you thought they were significant. Following completion of all the interviews you will be invited to a focus group with the other interview participants where I will share the initial findings and invite you to contribute to the interpretation of these. You will also be able to offer your views of how social work education, both practice and academic, could be developed in light of these findings. If you choose to take part in the interviews you do not have to also choose to take part in the focus group if you do not wish to. All participation will be voluntary. The interview and focus group will be audio taped in order that I have an accurate account of your contribution.

You will be able to request a copy of the interview transcript in order to check for points of accuracy and/or to provide clarification of the points made. If you make such a request we will agree together an appropriate time-frame for you to complete this before I progress with the research project.

#### **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

There should be no disadvantages in you taking part in this research. Some of the experiences you wish to discuss may be emotive. If you are finding this difficult to discuss or if you become upset I will check whether you wish to continue. You are free to stop the interview either temporarily or permanently. If you feel you would like to talk about some of these issues that have caused you distress outside a research context I can help you identify who might be the most appropriate person for you to talk to.

The content of what you wish to discuss will be entirely under your discretion and no pressure will be put on you to discuss things you are not comfortable discussing.

#### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Your contribution will be valuable to the furthering of knowledge about the development of professional judgement skills in social work. I consider that gaining a perspective from those who have recently been students, on how skills are developed in real life situations is crucial to the appropriate development of social work education. There may also be a personal benefit to you in reflecting on and sharing your experiences as you move into being a qualified social worker.

#### **Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?**

Information that you provide will be kept confidential, no information that you disclose will lead to the identification of you, any other individual or organisations. Your name will not be used or stored with the data transcript of your interview. Any characteristics that could identify you will either be omitted or changed in order that your confidentiality is maintained. There will be nothing to link the consent form that you sign to the information you provide in the interview. All data collected during the course of this research project will only be used for the intended purpose as described and this will always be presented anonymously.

The only exception to the above statement on confidentiality is if something you say indicates a significant risk to service users or other students. If this arises I may need to share the information with another person at the university or at the practice organisation. If

this is the case I will discuss with you how this information should be passed on to relevant parties and why.

The audio tape of the interview and focus group will be deleted once they have been transcribed and the transcriptions of interviews and the focus group will be held on a password secured computer.

**What should I do if I want to take part or want further information?**

Please email or phone me on the contact details below or speak to me directly and we can arrange a mutually convenient time to meet or I can answer any further questions.

**What will happen to the research?**

The research will be presented in the form of a thesis to fulfil the Doctor of Social Work that I am undertaking at the University of Sussex. It may also be published or presented as part of an academic paper. As stated above, I also intend that the findings be used to help educate and inform practice educators and other social work educators and to inform future social work students during the course of their education.

**Who is organising the research?**

The research is being organised via The School of Education and Social Work at The University of Sussex with the agreement of London South Bank University

**Who has reviewed the study?**

The research is being supervised by Professor Imogen Taylor, Professor of Social Work and Social Care at The University of Sussex and has gained ethical approval from The School of Education and Social Work at The University of Sussex with the agreement of London South Bank University.

**Is there anything else I need to know about?**

In the context of this study, my role in relation to you will be solely as researcher. No prior information that I have been party to in my role as a lecturer on your course will have any bearing on the research or will be used in any presentation of findings. The information used will entirely be that which you voluntarily provide to me during the course of the interview and focus group. The purpose of the research is not to evaluate or assess you in anyway but rather to value the contribution you can make and insights you can provide to this subject.

**Contact for Further Information**

Please contact me if you would like any further information before deciding to take part. If you have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted please contact my supervisor Professor Imogen Taylor [i.j.taylor@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:i.j.taylor@sussex.ac.uk)  
Joanna Rawles

## 7.5 Appendix 5: Interview guide

### Interview guide with possible prompts

“For the purpose of this research I am using the following definition of what I mean when I say professional judgement”

To draw a conclusion, make a decision, offer an opinion or recommend a course of action within a professional context as a social work student

- Can you tell me about an example of something that happened in either of your placements that you consider was significant to the development of your professional judgement?
  - Prompt – It doesn't need to be anything of significant complexity just something that you think of when you think of developing or learning to formulate or use your professional judgement on placement
  - Prompt – can you describe what happened; what happened next; what did you do etc
- Why do you think this event was significant to your learning?
  - Prompt – what made you choose/think of that event?
  - Prompt – what makes the event stand out for you
  - Prompt - what was it about the event that made you realize you were becoming more able to use the skills of professional judgement?
- What, if anything, do you think contributed to your learning with regard to this event?
  - Prompt – is there anything else that contributed to this being an event in which you developed your professional judgement skills?
  - Prompt – anything else in placement?
  - Prompt – anything else in the rest of your social work education?
  - Prompt – anything else that was not part of the structured social work education
- Are there any other events from either of your placements that you would like to share
  - Continue with prompts as above

Joanna Rawles  
April 2014

## 7.6 Appendix 6: Consent form interviews



University of Sussex

**PROJECT TITLE:**

How do social work students develop professional judgement skills?

**Project Approval Reference:**

ER/JR325/1

### Interview

I agree to take part in the above research project. I have had the project explained to me and I have read and understood the Information Sheet, which I may keep for my records. I understand that agreeing to take part means that I am willing to

- Be interviewed by the researcher
- Allow the interview to be audio taped

I understand that any information I provide is confidential, and that no information that I disclose will lead to the identification, by anyone other than the researcher, of any individual or organisation unless there is a concern about significant risk to service users or students. Any such issue will be dealt with as outlined in the Information Sheet.

I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.

I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes of this research study. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Joanna Rawles



## 7.7 Appendix 7: Consent form focus group



**PROJECT TITLE:**

How do social work students develop professional judgement skills?

**Project Approval Reference:** ER/JR325/1

Focus Group

I agree to take part in a focus group as part of the above research project. I have had the project explained to me and I have read and understood the Information Sheet, which I may keep for my records. I understand that agreeing to take part means that I am willing to

- Take part in a focus group with other research participants facilitated by the researcher
- Allow the focus group to be audio taped
- Agree to respect the confidentiality of other group members by not disclosing that they are participants of the research or by discussing the content of their contribution with anyone outside the group.

I understand that any information I provide is confidential to the group and that no information that I disclose will lead to the identification of any individual or organisation unless there is a concern about significant risk to service users or students. Any such issue will be dealt with as outlined in the Information Sheet.

I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.

I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes of this research study. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Joanna Rawles

## 7.8 Appendix 8: Data analysis example i

Data extract	Coded to Nvivo node	Themes	Domains
<p>I think holding a caseload. I felt a lot of ownership over everything that was in my caseload and knowing that, you know, that the kind of – although it didn't, because I was a student, that the buck stopped with me. I think knowing that meant that when I got given information I also felt the need to act on it as well because it wasn't like someone else was going to deal with that, "Oh, actually I'm the one dealing with that." So it was almost like by virtue of having to make the decisions, the decisions were easy – not easy, but do you know what I mean? I don't know if it's a, you know, "I want to get it right", or you know, I don't know what it is but... you're about to present in front of a very experienced social work team, a CPN, a consultant forensic psychiatrist, another psychiatrist, you know, so you feel, "Oh, actually I need to know this stuff". Because ultimately you don't want your service users to be short-changed. You're their co-coordinator, regardless of if it suits your learning process or not, you're the co-coordinator and that's not fair if you don't get it right. So you need the other people in the room to respect what you're wanting to do so that when you come in and say, "I really need you to see this person", they don't fob you off. So, I feel like that was quite important.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsibility/ independence/ expectation/ ownership</li> <li>• Communicating/ presenting professional judgement</li> <li>• Advocating for service user</li> <li>• Understanding the process/ roles of decision making</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunity for practice responsibility</li> <li>• Ownership of professional responsibility</li> <li>• Understanding the responsibility for PJ in social work</li> <li>• Responsibility toward service users</li> <li>• Responsibility to communicate professional judgement</li> </ul>	Professional responsibility

## 7.9 Appendix 9: Data analysis example ii

Data extract	Coded to Nvivo node	Themes	Domains
<p>At the beginning I just thought that my PE just had an issue with me, honestly, because for every single thing that I said she had a famous phrase, “And what is that? Can you explain that?” and all she is looking for is the theories, methodologies, the theories. And she wants me to hone in on them because previously I wasn’t able to do that, a lot of that. Yes, I knew that there’s maybe a task-centred approach or a solution focused approach, or I’ve used a narrative here or I’ve used that task-centred or anything like that. But I wouldn’t be able to, within talking about my cases it was not so easy to say, “Oh, I did this with them and then I did that with them, and because of this I felt that was maybe the effects of maybe losses within their own families or effects of the attachments, their own parenting capacity being influenced by things that happened to them in their own childhood or their own upbringing,” and stuff like that. I wasn’t able to speak clearly like that. And it was her getting me to realise that for everything that I’m doing there has to be a reason. So if I’m writing a report, for instance, what kind of report am I going to do? Am I putting my own unprofessional language, just going off on one? Or being clear about why I’ve done something, how, what is it that I’ve done? And that helped within my analysis as well, actually, all my analysis sections on the Form F, because for each section that I was looking at I then had to be clear about what is it? Why am I saying what I’m saying? How has she developed those things that I’m highlighting?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge - formal</li> <li>• Facilitated to come up with opinion</li> <li>• Being challenged</li> <li>• Realisation/understanding of evidence base to decision making</li> <li>• Communicating/ presenting professional judgement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active encouragement of professional opinion</li> <li>• Positive challenge</li> <li>• Responsibility to communicate PJ</li> <li>• Pursuit, use and application of knowledge</li> </ul>	<p>Facilitation of the professional voice</p> <p>Professional responsibility</p> <p>Learner Agency</p>

## 7.10 Appendix 10: Data analysis example iii

Data extract	Coded to Nvivo node	Themes	Domains
<p>I think I always had discussions with other people. I remember one that I think I might have told you about, one of the families I worked with she was having the child adopted. I remember in that case I think I had a lot more discussions with other people about kind of how – I think about in terms of child development it was more of, “What would be best for this child? What do I think would be best for the child?”</p> <p>I kind of used other people, I remember having a long discussion with one of the managers about you know, about this child and about his development and about do I think it's best that – because with that I don't think it was very clear cut and every social worker that I spoke to had a different – you know they kind of had – there was generally two opinions. She doesn't keep the child or she does keep the child, and to me that was really interesting because sometimes I suppose you think as social workers we all have the same you know, we all kind of come to the same conclusion but within that case and with that family, it kind of made me realise that even though we're all social workers we can still have different opinions about different things.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accepting uncertainty/ differing opinion</li> <li>• Agency in learning/active learning</li> <li>• Learning with/from peers</li> <li>• Reflecting/deliberating/processing with others</li> <li>• The role of doubt and how its responded to</li> <li>• Knowledge formal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunity for practice responsibility</li> <li>• Active engagement with people and opportunities to facilitate learning</li> <li>• Pursuit, use and application of knowledge</li> <li>• Reflection and deliberation</li> <li>• Accepting uncertainty and differing opinion</li> </ul>	<p>Professional Responsibility</p> <p>Learner Agency</p>

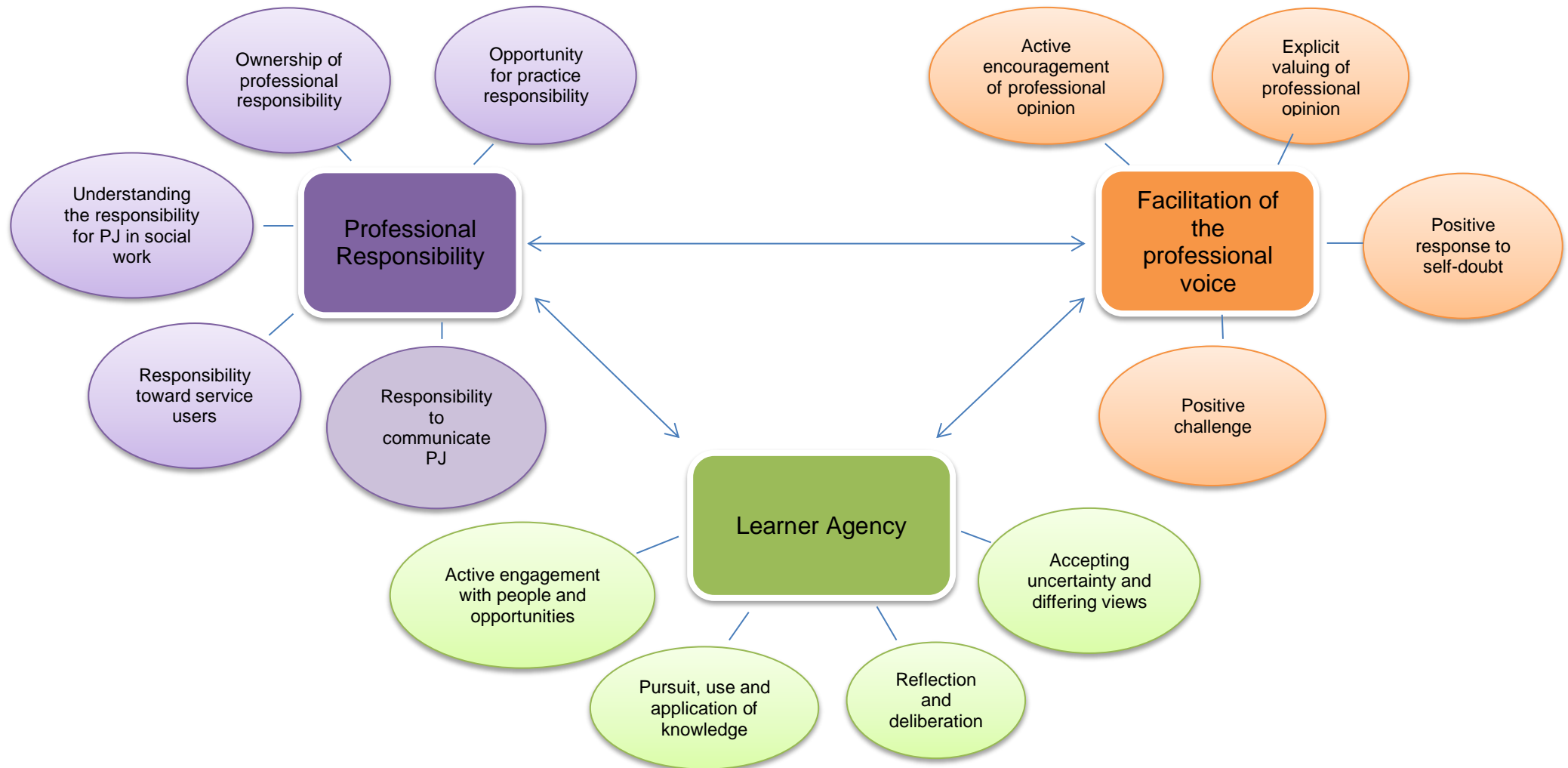
## 7.11 Appendix 11: Data analysis example iv

Data extract	Coded to Nvivo node	Themes	Domains
<p><b>Respondent:</b> older adult mental health. I got listened to a lot, which was brilliant. My practice educator there, he kind of made me a bit more confident about my professional judgement than the first person did because he would listen and he would take what I said on board, and would take you in and he'd be like, "No, I trust your judgement on this." And that was definitely the confidence boost in terms of what I now use.</p> <p>Interviewer: And he actually said that, did he? "I trust your judgement on this."</p> <p>Respondent: Yeah, he did. He really did, I mean he would come out on visits with me now and again but in terms of doing – so and I had a good time with like shadowing people as well before I kind of got thrown in the deep end. But doing like mental capacity assessments and stuff like that, he would help me for a bit and then he was like, "No, I've seen how you work, I kind of trust you with that." So that was very different, it was like more kind of, it was a much smaller team, we had one manager who was my practice educator and then like four social workers so that was easier as well, you can kind of bounce off each other.</p> <p><b>Interviewer:</b> So with mental capacity assessments as you were mentioning?</p> <p><b>Respondent:</b> Yeah.</p> <p><b>Interviewer:</b> And so he would kind of say, "Over to you now."?</p> <p><b>Respondent:</b> Yeah.</p> <p><b>Interviewer:</b> Yeah, and how did that feel? That kind of transition.</p> <p><b>Respondent:</b> It was scary because capacity is such a big thing that you could really ruin someone's life with if you get it wrong, but it – so yeah it was definitely scary but the way that he kind of prepared me for it, talked me through things you know, he asked me what questions was I going to ask, that kind of made me feel more confident going in there. So I felt more comfortable with my judgement, and there was one lady I was very unsure but I kind of said, "Oh, I might need your help." Because he's an AMHP as well, said, "I might need your help just to kind of clarify my judgement on this." And he didn't do it in a kind of patronising way, it was – it made it kind of easier to come to my own judgement if that makes sense. So he came out and said, "No, I agree with you, yeah she's got some capacity in some areas but not others."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Validation of professional opinion</li> <li>• Responsibility/ independence/ expectation/ ownership</li> <li>• Confidence</li> <li>• Self-doubt</li> <li>• Impact on service users</li> <li>• Learning with/from peers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explicit valuing of professional opinion</li> <li>• Active encouragement of professional opinion</li> <li>• Positive response to self-doubt</li> <li>• Opportunity for practice responsibility</li> <li>• Responsibility towards service users</li> <li>• Active engagement with people and opportunities to facilitate learning</li> </ul>	<p>Facilitation of the professional voice</p> <p>Professional responsibility</p> <p>Learner agency</p>

## 7.12 Appendix 12: Data analysis example v

Date extract	Coded to Nvivo nodes	Themes	Domains
<p><b>Interviewer:</b> And so if you were to sum up then, what are some of the main things that helped you develop that, do you think?</p> <p><b>Respondent:</b> Well, I think that, kind of, formalisation of you are, like, a professional. Like, this is isn't just an opinion. This is, kind of, your analysis of a load of information and, you know, like, this, sort of, situation and circumstances that you're dealing with. It's not just a personal opinion. It's actually, like, a professional opinion and you have to justify it and put it into the context of where you're working and, you know, you have to put your name to it as a state registered social worker. (Laughs) Which I don't think I realised, you know, the difference between that, actually - the, kind of, professionalisation of your work.</p> <p><b>Interviewer:</b> At what point did you realise that, or is it a bit difficult to tell?</p> <p><b>Respondent:</b> I think it was quite late on, actually. I think maybe towards the end of my first placement. And then that, kind of, got crystallised in my second placement when my work-based supervisor said, "So," you know, "As a practitioner, what do you think?" So I practice social work now, don't I? This isn't just, you know, a voluntary sector support worker role anymore. This is, like, my view on this complex social situation (laughs) and complex behaviours.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cognisant of social work role/authority</li> <li>• Responsibility/independence/expectation /ownership</li> <li>• Facilitated to come up with opinion</li> <li>• Communicating professional judgement</li> <li>• Knowledge practice wisdom</li> <li>• Building on learning from placement experiences</li> <li>• Gradual learning</li> <li>• Pivotal moment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ownership of professional responsibility</li> <li>• Understanding the reasonability for professional judgement in social work</li> <li>• Responsibility to communication professional judgement</li> <li>• Active encouragement of professional opinion</li> </ul>	<p>Professional responsibility</p> <p>Facilitation of the professional voice</p>

### 7.13 Appendix 13: Thematic map



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